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## Globalisation, social exclusion and the politics of New Labour in Britain

How can this mean good news for the poor?

topics:

- *critical assessment of New Labour politics in Britain*
- *“social exclusion” as a new analytical tool of social politics*
- *employment or social welfare?*
- *the concept of communitarism*
- *the role of the church in Great Britain*
- *a liberating theology*

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### Abstract

*Over the past seven or eight years the notion of social exclusion has grown in prominence within European social policy. Increasingly, it has supplanted “poverty” as the major index of deprivation and as the major target for welfare reform. Its abolition is a key element of New Labour’s policy agenda in Britain.*

*Social exclusion is multiple and complex, requiring radical measures. It calls forth from New Labour the prospect of “joined-up” government pledged to attack causes, rather than a return to the Old Labour solution of “tax and spend”. In effect, however, it seems that current policies are actually doing little to interpret social inclusion in terms other than the work ethic. Despite the view that social exclusion will best be cured by improving people’s employment prospects, the changing nature of global capitalism and the profound fragility of labour markets makes it unlikely that the job market will be able to render such an expansion of opportunities. Yet at the heart of social exclusion and inclusion are important issues about the nature of citizenship: a serious and long-term approach to “joined-up” government would take the opportunity to look at the connections between welfare reform and constitutional reform, regarding the relief of poverty and social exclusion as matters of empowerment and participation in the democratic process.*

*The churches are in a critical position in relation to campaigns around social inclusion. They proved to be valuable advocates and allies for many marginalized urban communities during the Thatcher/Major years, and the present government clearly regards the churches as significant agents in helping to implement New Deal programmes and other initiatives. Yet the moralistic approach of Blair-*

*ism/New Labourism makes it all the more imperative that the churches look to see how theology is used to political ends. The re-injection of moral discourse into public debate may well turn out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing for the Christian Left if it simply brings about the stigmatisation, rather than the empowerment, of those in poverty.*

*It is necessary to ensure that the voices and perspectives of those most affected by poverty in all its forms are given consideration. This is a fundamental commission of the Church: to counter the invisibility and marginalization that really constitutes social exclusion. I shall argue that a liberating praxis which embodies a contextual, transformative and humanizing theology is an essential tool in the churches' response over the next few years. In the way in which it models community and participation, the Church can express profound theological truths in its practices of solidarity and empowerment.*

## Introduction

In this paper, I want to take some aspects of current social policy in the United Kingdom and examine their moral, political and theological implications. I hope this will serve as a case study with which many people from different contexts can identify. Since the mid 1980s the churches in Britain, and especially the Church of England, have been active participants in urban issues. The Church of England report, *Faith in the City*, was a landmark in Church-State relations, and established many programmes of the Church's partnership with communities in urban priority areas. But now a change of government, and a new discourse about poverty and inequality, presents a new challenge. What is at stake in this shift from "poverty" to "social exclusion" and what are the principles on which the churches should participate in future urban policy and social renewal?

## Social exclusion

Social exclusion has been a feature of policy debate around issues of deprivation since the early 1990s. It has come to be the preferred term for describing and analyzing the nature of social divisions in European advanced capitalist economies. In Britain, it has become one of the key principles of the Blair government. In December 1997 a new Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was announced which, it was said, would provide a coordinated and systematic approach to the phenomenon. The reason for this new Unit was precisely because "social exclusion" as an issue implied a more complex and interconnected analysis of social deprivation than the simple term "poverty".

"Social exclusion" has been defined as "a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown". Given the compound nature of the problems, the SEU was established precisely to co-ordinate the work of government departments, local authorities and the voluntary sector, with an emphasis on research into "the key indicators of social exclusion" and prevention. The SEU therefore symbolizes what has come to be called "joined-up" government: an attempt to co-ordinate services, to systematize welfare reform, and to adopt a more proactive, even preventative, approach to the problems of inequality.

It is interesting, however, that beyond a general indication of the most vulnerable groups (the elderly, children and young people, ethnic minorities and the loner term unemployed) and the multiple symptoms of social exclusion, the SEU is remarkably imprecise about its deeper causes and characteristics. Undoubtedly, social inequality, exclusion and deprivation are serious problems in Britain today. By any measure, inequality has grown markedly over the past twenty years.

Qualitatively, too, there is cause for concern. The journalist Nick Davies paints a picture of an entire sub-culture of deprivation that has been contaminated by the fall-out of unemployment and poverty: drug abuse, high crime, fractured and demoralized communities and family breakdown. No wonder then, that many, including those in the churches, hoped that the incoming Blair administration would make social equality and redistribution of wealth a major priority. The announcement of the Social Exclusion Unit and its accompanying programmes may certainly be seen as a key measure in all this; but it is also part of a much wider scheme of welfare reform. In order to understand where the language of social exclusion is coming from, therefore, it is important to look at some of the other influences on New Labour.

### From equality to social inclusion

Tony Blair's speeches reflect an understanding of poverty as a threat to the very fabric of our society. What we have here, therefore, is a campaign against social exclusion mounted in the name not so much of social equality or social justice, as terms of social cohesion. As Ruth Levitas puts it, it reflects an essentially Durkheimian analysis of the dangers of social dislocation to the stability of the social order.<sup>1</sup> For the French sociologist and political scientist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) society was founded upon systems of shared values. Institutions - including religion - functioned to protect that moral consensus and facilitate the integration of the individual into the collective. If anything threatened that process of socialization - a dislocation Durkheim termed *anomie* - then individuals and society would suffer. Critics of Durkheim protest that it is an inherently conservative model of society, in that any kind of conflict, pluralism or change are regarded as pathological, and that the values of consensus and unity are cherished at the expense of social change or protest against injustice. In its emphasis on healing the divisions of the Thatcher/Major years, therefore, has New Labour played the 'One Nation' card only to find itself commending a simplistic vision of social harmony - a vision that precludes any attempt to reintroduce the language of social equality and social justice?

In the rhetoric of social exclusion there has been a paradigm shift away from a vision of an egalitarian society, facilitated by the redistribution of wealth, to one of civic virtue and the responsibilities, as well as the rights, of citizenship. This is often expressed in the language of *stakeholding*, in which education and training, mentoring and the efficacy of paid work, are dominant: "... what underpins the

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Levitas, "The Concept of Social Exclusion and the New Durkheimian Hegemony", *Critical Social Policy*, 16:1, 1996, 5-20.

fundamental idea of stakeholding is that social and economic, inclusion, rather than equality, should be the overriding objective for the contemporary left.”<sup>2</sup>

This shift from egalitarianism to stakeholding as a route to social inclusion reflects a number of different ideological influences, all loosely converging on New Labour’s celebrated “Third Way”, an attempt to articulate an alternative to centralised welfare democracy and neo-liberalism. But the prominence of social exclusion as disrupting the bonds of civil society and social consensus only really begins to make sense within the context of communitarianism. We can’t understand the current emphasis on social exclusion – and its implications – without looking at the appeal to New Labour of communitarianism.

## Communitarianism

Communitarianism is actually more of a philosophical movement than a political doctrine. It is essentially a reaction against the individualism of neoliberalism and the centralist socialism of the Old Left. Communitarianism teaches that individuals are not isolated creatures, but shaped by their environment and social relationships. Human nature is interdependent; and community is thus the context in which human nature flourishes best.<sup>3</sup> Communitarianism enables New Labour to retain the language of collectivism without any unhappy taint of the language of class or State.

At the heart of New Labour’s rhetoric of social exclusion, fuelled by its discovery of communitarianism, therefore, is a plaiting together of three core principles: social cohesion, economic efficiency and moral renewal. The solution to social exclusion is founded on a reciprocal relationship between individual and State. Whilst poverty or unemployment *per se* is not condemned, the expectation is that the individual owes a moral debt to society to help themselves. Nonparticipation is fundamentally a moral issue; and constructive citizenship based on a contribution to society is the “social glue” that binds the civic order together.

Thus, we have seen in the past years the advent of “welfare to work”, a clutch of programmes designed to reduce welfare dependency through paid work supported by incentive schemes, mentoring initiatives and training opportunities. Young people in particular have been targeted under a series of four options of work experience, training or careers advice. It reflects a commitment to welfare rights being conditional upon recipients fulfilling certain duties, such as accepting a training place. Similarly, in education, homeschool contracts between parents and teachers have been mooted, in which parents must agree to certain obligations – such as homework and regular attendance – in return for the child’s inclusion in state education.

There is, undoubtedly, a measure of coercion in this: measures announced in February 1999 require disabled people and lone parents to attend job interviews or forfeit benefit. In order to shift the balance away from dependency to responsibility, therefore, the government has adopted a very interventionist and directive ap-

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<sup>2</sup> Will Hutton, “An overview of stakeholding”, in G. Kelly, D. Kelly and A. Gamble (eds) *Stakeholder Capitalism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Exemplified by the Prime Ministers rather tortuous political revisionism: “... individuals are socially interdependent human beings... individuals cannot be divorced from society in which they belong. It is, if you will, socialism.” (Tony Blair, *Socialism*, Fabian Society, 1994, p.4)

proach, which, as its critics have always said,<sup>4</sup> is a typical characteristic of communitarianism: the iron fist of obligation beneath the velvet glove of mutuality. For whilst all communitarians pay lip service to the interplay of rights and responsibilities, the degree to which policies expect individuals to observe prescriptive norms, and the extent to which such norms are mandatory or voluntary, will vary.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there are progressive/pluralist and conservative/conformist communitarians, the former celebrating community as the embodiment of liberty, multiculturalism, tolerance of difference, and the latter espousing values of homogeneity, order and authority. Therefore, “community” may turn out to be a synonym for State intervention.

But the highest virtue of the “third way” of social inclusion is economic participation. New Labour may reject market individualism, but it stops short of challenging capitalism – indeed, it depends on private enterprise as well as local government, on ‘economic’ as well as ‘social’ entrepreneurs in the business and voluntary sectors, to provide job opportunities and positive role models. Economic efficiency, and especially curbing the moral and fiscal drain on the economy of welfare dependency, is thus a crucial part of wealth creation and social regeneration. ‘Stakeholding’ means helping the poor and socially excluded obtain a stake in society by getting them back into the labour market. Fundamentally, therefore, employment is regarded as the primary route to social participation and cohesion.

We may well judge that this amounts to a dissolution of Labour’s commitment to social equality and the redistribution of wealth, and its replacement with the expectation that individuals create their own opportunities by getting themselves into the labour market. But how realistic is this? What about those who cannot work – yet must still be available for work? What if the jobs simply aren't materializing? Is it not the case that, far from shifting the language away from work and poverty, social exclusion has done little more than reinscribe an outdated concept of the work ethic and reinstitutionalise a policy of “blaming the victim”.

### “Work is the best form of welfare”

Surely no-one could be content with a welfare system that concentrated on funding the ambulances at the bottom of the cliff without putting a fence at the top. Certainly, poverty must be attacked at source, and the most profound root of poverty for the majority of people is undoubtedly lack of adequately-paid work. Hence the emphasis on Welfare to Work and - let us not forget, the implementation of a minimum wage – as essential tools for tackling the corrosive effects of unemployment, and of putting people back to work.

However, is this sufficient? Can paid work deliver what is needed to tackle social exclusion? The basis of unemployment policy is that benefits are payable subject to people’s availability and willingness to work. The anti-poverty strategies seem heavily committed to re-enshrining the work ethic, as this quotation indicates: “... work is central to the government’s attack on social exclusion. Work is the only route to sustained financial independence. But it is also much more. Work is not just about earning a living. It is a way of life ... [W]e are reforming this welfare state around the work ethic. Promoting employability, adaptability and inclusion.”

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Bell, *Communitarianism and its Critics*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Driver & Martell, *New labour's communitarians*.

So, work may be the best way of providing an adequate income; but in stressing its importance as the basis of social inclusion, is there not a risk that exclusion is actually compounded? The implicit assumption that work is the panacea for poverty is the target of criticism made by Ruth Lister and other opponents of Welfare to Work, in their comments on the government Green Paper, summer 1998, “A New Contract for Welfare”.<sup>6</sup>

The principle of “work for those who can; security for those who cannot” places all the pressure on jobseekers and no bonus on job-creation or income support for those made unemployed by no fault of their own.

These concerns reflect the limitations of such a scheme in its failure to address the needs of those who cannot work, such as those who care for young children, or assist a disabled or elderly friend or relative, or perform other forms of voluntary and community service. Alternative patterns of provision will still have to be made available, because “Welfare to Work”-schemes are not appropriate for their needs.

Even for the young unemployed, it is rare that short-term jobs will deliver long-term opportunities. Subsidies for young workers generally means that each new generation undercuts the last. Similarly, the government says that there are a million disabled people who want to work: but has the proper infrastructure been put in place to make this possible?

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the traditional capitalist economy of mass production, offering large numbers of low-skill jobs, has been replaced by a global economy in which the exchange and transfer of information, rather than manufacturing, creates wealth. Technology has rendered many jobs redundant; the nature of employment now is one of short-term jobs, down-sizing, insecurity, part-time and subcontracting. These mean fewer jobs, especially those unskilled labour. This is not the result of any individual's lack of will, but due to a structural shift in the nature of how and where wealth is created. Work can no longer confer a clear, stable, lifelong identity with a good network of expectations.

“Work for those who can, and security for those who cannot” seems something of an over-simplification in the face of an increasingly complex labour market in which job insecurity and unpredictability is as much a risk as unemployment.

And despite bold assurances that “the views of the socially excluded themselves” will be incorporated into the joined-up solutions, what seems to be emerging is an emphasis on punishing or rewarding the qualities, attitudes and behaviour of the socially excluded rather than pursuing structural approaches and resources to eliminate social exclusion. This is not too far away from the logic of the underclass, so beloved of New Right thinkers in the 1980s: of locating the problems of poverty in the characteristics of the poor, and systematically demonising them as feckless, irresponsible and incapable. Those who had no work are assumed to have placed themselves beyond the pale of compassion; by virtue of their maladjustment and pathology, the underclass had placed themselves beyond the pale of decent society. The poor really are different from “us”; and so policy makers were justified in applying principles which discouraged such a dependency culture in order to get the poor off benefits and back to useful productivity. It gave government permission to retreat from the post-war vision of relieving poverty back to a more Victorian ethos of regulating the poor; and the issue was no longer struc-

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth Lister, “Widening the poverty trap door”, *Times Higher*, 7 August 1998, 14-15

tural, in terms of wage levels, unemployment, transfer payments or redistribution of wealth, but personal: the behaviour of those in poverty.

New Labour prefers to talk the language of “social exclusion” to that of “poverty”. The benefit of this is that it widens the scope to embrace the multiplicity of ways in which people may be marginalized and excluded. The risk is, however, that by treating the symptoms and not addressing the causes of poverty, this new language of social exclusion, will have a similar effect of demonising the poor and displacing structural explanations and solutions with individual causes, resting in the moral behaviour of a distinct and pathological underclass, “The Socially Excluded”. In this way, the “problem of the underclass” successfully effaces “the issue of poverty”.<sup>7</sup> It is imperative therefore that the joined-up thinking which acknowledges the compound and pluralistic nature of poverty is not submerged by a simplistic reinforcement of the work ethic. As a leader in the *Guardian* newspaper commented, “Labour's ambitious welfare-to-work programme is delivering the first half of its welfare mantra (‘work for those who can’) but it has still to follow through on the equally important second half (‘security for those who cannot’)”.<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, the Social Exclusion Unit is also committed to comprehensive policies to reform other areas of social policy, such as education, youth justice, local regeneration, housing need and public health. But the source of social cohesion is fundamentally equated with an efficient and accessible job market. But whilst poverty can be linked to low incomes, the time has come, surely to question the assumption that poverty or social exclusion can easily be cured by getting everyone back to work. Certainly, evidence suggests that the vast majority of those unemployed and eligible for work desperately want a job; but as I have argued, the nature of current economic trends suggests that vulnerability to poverty is not a question of whether or not one is out of work. I wonder whether we need to move to a rather ‘thicker’ and richer definition of social participation and inclusion than one that depends on access to the job market. Isn't it time to rethink our definitions of citizenship and community?

### **Social inclusion or Citizenship?**

*“Without skills and opportunities people become detached not just from work, but also from citizenship in its widest sense.”<sup>9</sup>*

It would be regrettable if New Labour were to endorse the, I believe, oversimplified notion that social exclusion can be constituted in terms of lack of access to the labour market. Not only does it cloud the situation of those in low-paid or insecure employment and of those undertaking unpaid caring work; but it prevents our moving towards more inclusive models of participation and social inclusion that are not tied into the primacy of paid work. But this is precisely the problem: we don't know how to build a community on any other forms of social belonging or value other than work! At a time when the labour market is fragmenting, and work is becoming less of an integrating factor, less of a source of endur-

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<sup>7</sup> Zygrnund Bauman, *Work, consumerism and the new poor*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998, p.70.

<sup>8</sup> “Blair's Social Agenda: Can he win the war on poverty?”, *Guardian*, 7 June 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Blair, *SEU*, p. 8.

ing identity and esteem, our models of social inclusion and citizenship are so impoverished that getting back into a highly problematic and insecure job market is still seen as the universal remedy.

This is disappointing, because in other respects New Labour has set itself up as a socially liberal administration, committed to constitutional reform and to legislation that reflects an awareness of cultural pluralism – the lowering of the age of consent for homosexual males, for example, or the attempts to address institutional racism. Indeed, if all that social inclusion will address are economically-based measures of social stratification, then that effectively obscures issues of race, gender, sexuality or dis/ability as facets needing to be addressed in any revitalized discourse of citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Yet for all the talk of 'joined-up' government, of participation and consultation in the early pronouncements of the SEU, the agendas of political participation and economic inclusion have yet to be connected. Yet there is a strong case for arguing that social exclusion entails more than deficient access to paid work, but is actually rooted in an inability to participate in all kinds of social and cultural goods: transport, local participation, community facilities or indeed access to information technologies, perhaps the most crucial source of wealth and power in the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup> And surely, political reform is essential in order to enable people to participate in decisions that affect them, to overcome the so-called "democratic deficit". It is about more than a skills-based, competitive economy: it is about power. It seems that it may be time for a renewal of what Hilary Silver calls "the moral imagination" of citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

The language of social exclusion reveals how New Labour's solutions are still too deeply embedded in centralised control and state prescription and a conviction in the ameliorative power of work which is hugely problematic in our contemporary global economy. A vision of social cohesion founded on equity and participation is by no means synonymous with welfare to work; and the moral renewal of our civil society does not depend on top-down enforcement. The moral contribution of the individual is stressed, rather than fiscal or structural issues of redistribution and investment; a Whitehall vision of community is pursued, rather than attention to the stories and experiences of those at the sharp end.

### The role of the church

So now I turn to the role of the churches. In many ways, the churches are enjoying more credibility than for many years, having exercised a ministry of solidarity alongside many of the most excluded communities in the 'urban priority areas' of Britain during the Thatcher/Major years (1979-97). The publication in 1985 of the Archbishops' Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, established the Church of England as one of the most effective opponents of the Conservative regime of the 1980s, and set in train more than a decade of church-related community initiatives. Undoubtedly, the Church of England has credibility for its urban strategy, although its continued presence in the inner cities – and therefore its championing, almost by default, of the most underprivileged and marginalized communities – probably has more to do with the parochial system than with any

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth Lister, "Vocabularies of citizenship and gender: the UK", *Critical Social Policy*, No. 56, Vol. 18/3, August 1998, 309-331, p. 324.

<sup>11</sup> Neil McIntosh, "The New Poor", *Guardian*, July 22 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Hilary Silver, *Social Exclusion and Social Solidarity*, p. 531



clearly-articulated commitment to Liberation Theology: an example of Anglican pragmatism, an accident of the Church's established status, with perhaps a modicum of incarnational theology thrown in.<sup>13</sup>

With the election of a New Labour government, however, the churches retain a degree of credibility in urban policy. The fact that many members of the Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, are practising Christians, has given the churches a higher profile in political debate; and this greater affinity between Christian values and New Labour, in contrast to the more hostile relationship under the Conservatives, has been welcomed by many. Church-related organizations are becoming accepted as significant agencies in many of the emerging regeneration partnerships. The Social Exclusion Unit is actively promoting the involvement of the churches in New Deal and other schemes. SEU solicits opinions on social exclusion and its policies from many church-related pressure groups: the Church of England Urban Bishops' group has been consulted, for example. The Anglican Diocese of Liverpool employs its own New Deal Officer. Recently, Church Action on Poverty held a training day on Mentoring for church-based workers and volunteers. Arguably, however, the advent of SEU, New Deal and welfare to work constitutes more of a danger than the good old days of opposition, because now church-related groups have to decide how far they co-operate with these schemes, and how they take responsibility to steer the future of marginalized communities. If they opt into New Deal and all the other schemes, do they risk colluding with this potentially authoritarian trend? What are the alternatives? So at this point, I have chosen to draw some lessons from Liberation Theology, to see whether some of its principles might guide us in establishing priorities and criteria for authentic faith and praxis.

### **Liberating theology and the Gospel of the poor**

*“Liberation theology is not an ideology or academic theory, but an attempt to explain the renewal of Christianity which has come about through the Church's re-discovery of the poor”.*<sup>14</sup>

The situation in Britain and the First World is so radically different from that which first gave birth to it that I am wary of assuming that Liberation Theology can be imported whole scale from its historical context. Nevertheless, it seems that there are three defining characteristics of a *theology that liberates* which may help. Authentic theology, first and foremost, is that which preaches good news to the poor: and for liberation theologians it is necessarily *contextual* and *political* in that it reflects the voices and aspirations of the poor. Secondly, theology is a body not of right belief but right action: and primarily, it seeks to humanize those whose basic human dignity has been violated. Thirdly, theology is always *practical theology*: the way in which the people of God live out the Good News is not a matter of 'applied' theology derived from a pre-existent body of knowledge. Rather, the reality of the Gospel is primarily manifested in living communities of justice and hope and only derivatively in propositional truth-claims.

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<sup>13</sup> Elaine Graham, "Theology in the City: Ten Years after Faith in the City", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Research Institute* 78, No. 1, March 1996, 179-197.

<sup>14</sup> CIIR, *Brazil: Democracy and Development*, Nottingham: Russell Press, 1992, p.20

*Theology begins with solidarity alongside the poor and marginalized.*

Liberation theology speaks of God's "preferential option for the poor", and this is fundamental to our method. The writer and campaigner Bob Holman has been an energetic advocate for the people of Easterhouse, an estate near Glasgow. As he has pointed out in a recent pamphlet on social inclusion, an attack on poverty was for socialists and Christian socialists always combined with a commitment to greater equality in terms of redistribution of wealth and "the *participation of poor people* in shaping society's services and values.."<sup>15</sup> The heralded involvement of those in "socially excluded" communities has yet to materialize. The Social Exclusion Unit "has excluded the excluded".<sup>16</sup> "It is not tackling poverty. It is not reducing poverty. It is not giving greater power to the powerless. It is not pursuing these objectives held in common by many Christians and socialists".<sup>17</sup> And, as he rightly says, these principles are, at heart, principles about the nature of a democratic and just society. There is a link between welfare reform, material prosperity, and ideals of justice, participation and democracy: the economic and the political/civil cannot be disentangled.

For Holman, therefore, the fundamental issue is about power to the powerless. The invisibility of the poor is, for him, exemplary of the dehumanisation that accompanies social and economic marginalisation. The greatest social exclusion of all is the silencing of these ordinary lives, especially by the media, so that issues such as crime, social exclusion and poverty are diagnosed and debated by outsiders. Those with the most acute experience of these phenomena are "treated as specimens to be examined and displayed, not as human beings with the rights and capacities to participate in the public debate." Holman has recently edited a book of stories and testimonies by residents of Easterhouse In so doing the top-down emphasis is subverted.

As Holman says, "Those at the bottom cannot silence the mighty. But, wherever possible, they should seek to release and propagate the words of those who are most precious to God ... the words and perceptions of the weak could be one means of undermining the values and assumptions by which the strong justify their ownership of too much of the resources which God intended for others".<sup>18</sup>

The testimonies of those Holman calls "the right writers" – Carol, Bill, Erica, Denise, Cynthia, Penny and Anita – who actually experience the daily realities of poverty, illustrate a number of things:

Poverty is not exaggerated: benefit levels are not over-generous, and a life on low income involves constant juggling, sacrifice and monotony.

The social fund and the shift from grants to loans has depressed people's incomes still further due to deductions, or driven people into the arms of loan sharks.

Poverty does not just consist of material deprivation, but psychological distress as well. Those in poverty have to battle with feelings of inadequacy, failure and low self-esteem. This is a new dimension of relative poverty and exclusion: worthlessness and depression.

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<sup>15</sup> Bob Holman, "A Voice from the Estate", in G. Smith (ed.) *Joined-up Writing: New Labour and social exclusion*, Christian Socialist Movement, March 1999, p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Holman, "A Voice from the Estate", p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Holman, "A Voice from the Estate", p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Faith in the Poor*, p. 23.

Listening to lives of hardship but also of resistance and endurance, it is impossible to conclude that the people whose lives are recorded here are really “...an underclass whose difficulties stem from their wickedness, neglect of children and a rejection of work. Rather they have to be regarded as people born into many disadvantages and whose efforts to survive are handicapped by conditions of deprivation and poverty. Far from creating poverty, they were flung into it.”<sup>19</sup>

This kind of experience undoubtedly calls for joined up thinking: but it feels as if the moral certainty behind the language of social exclusion already thinks it knows all the answers without consulting those who have actually been through it. And if the churches are really to opt for a transformative theology that truly empowers and re-humanises the socially excluded, it must challenge this neglect, and the likely proliferation of what I have termed the “social exclusion quangos” emanating from the top-down policies of Whitehall.

It would take a rethink of citizenship indeed, and one which effectively amounted to a new social contract between government and people. The social policy writer John Friedmann talks about a “decatalogue of citizen rights: ten major entitlements necessary for a full and participatory life”<sup>20</sup>:

- Professionally assisted birth
- Safe and secure life space
- Adequate diet
- Affordable health care
- Good education
- Political participation
- Economically productive life
- Protection against unemployment
- Dignified old age
- Decent burial

Cradle to grave indeed! These criteria go far beyond paid work, and begin to articulate basic privileges that might be granted to everybody. The vital nature of these kinds of social goods, at an accessible level to those who need them, points up the importance of strengthening civil society through new or renewed social networks and relationships. If these rights were placed at the heart of economic and social policy, then priorities might change. “The task is to transform the claims of these discarded citizens into rights and to give the multiple voices of the poor a chance to be heard in democratic deliberations through powerful organizations of their own.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Theology is not about “orthodoxy” but “orthopraxis”*

The task of the theologian, like Marx’s philosopher, is not simply to interpret the world, but to change it. Theology is rooted in orthopraxis, not orthodoxy. Right

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<sup>19</sup> *Faith in the Poor*, p.169

<sup>20</sup> John Friedmann, “Rethinking Poverty: empowerment and citizen rights”, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 48,1996,161-172.

<sup>21</sup> Friedmann, ‘Rethinking Poverty’, p. 171

believing, as Johannes Baptist Metz reminds us, reflects the Enlightenment rationalist captivity of religion. Rather, theology is the account of faithful and transformative *praxis*, or value-directed and value-driven action. And as Gutierrez has argued, the contemporary challenge to the Church's mission – of how it proclaims and embodies the Gospel anew in each generation – is not a matter of the problem of nonbelievers, but the scandal of *nonpersons*: "... the question in Latin America will not be how to speak of God in a world come of age, but rather how to proclaim God.. in a world that is inhumane. What can it mean to tell a non person that he or she is God's child?"<sup>22</sup> The commission, then, is to bring life, right relation, justice and full humanity.

As the recent Church Action on Poverty 'manifesto' argues, the future of a concept such as 'community' rests upon it being realised in day-to-day decision-making.<sup>23</sup> This, surely, is at the heart of a commitment to the issue of social exclusion as about resisting the dehumanisation of which Gutierrez speaks: about basic human rights, of decent material living standards and democratic entitlements of a say in one's own future.<sup>24</sup> An example of the expectation within marginalized communities that they will not be consulted comes from a report of a recent survey commissioned by Manchester University Settlement amongst young people (mainly 14-18 years old) about facilities and quality of life, comments in this way: "Nearly all the young people approached for surveys were keen to take part but expressed their surprise at being asked for their views and concerns about the area. A high majority of young people believed their opinions were unlikely to be taken seriously, but would give them anyway."<sup>25</sup>

This takes us back to fundamental issues of how we are governed – especially in a nation where we are still subjects and not citizens – the distribution not just of wealth but of power is crucial. Resistance to the corrosive effects of poverty often works best at local level, because it involves people who know what might work, although local action cannot be separated from the inequalities of power and wealth on a national and global level. However, those who live in poorer communities are already experimenting with such forms of empowerment, via diverse points of collective action at the grass-roots, such as neighbourhood groups, extended family and churches. Communities are renewed and people empowered by agencies such as a credit union, food co-ops, tenants' groups and family action/playscheme schemes – features absent, so far, from the agenda of the SEU. When asked, users' groups speak of the importance of accessibility (of staff and premises); facilities for children; participatory structures and local involvement. These factors are vital in delivering services that were needed and valued, and in building up confidence and skills locally. Indeed, some social policy analysts are convinced that such grass-roots activism is an essential part of a healthy infrastructure of genuine citizenship.

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<sup>22</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, SCM, 1983, p.57

<sup>23</sup> Niall Cooper (ed.) *Agenda For Change*, Manchester. Church Action on Poverty, February 1999, p. 24

<sup>24</sup> An example of the expectation within marginalized communities that they will not be consulted comes from a report of a recent survey commissioned by Manchester University Settlement amongst young people (mainly 14-18 years old) about facilities and quality of life, comments in this way: "Nearly all the young people approached for surveys were keen to take part but expressed their surprise at being asked for their views and concerns about the area. A high majority of young people believed their opinions were unlikely to be taken seriously, but would give them anyway." (Beswick, *Detached Project Survey Report*, Manchester, 1999, p.2).

<sup>25</sup> Beswick, *Detached Project Survey Report*, Manchester, 1999, p.2

### The Church embodies its liberating theology in a praxis of solidarity

Liberation theology, in its commitment to praxis, also articulates an important principle, namely the performative and incarnational nature of theology. Liberating theology emanates from communities that embody the Gospel; a Gospel that is made flesh in lived reality, then pronounced in word and deed. Theological truth lies, as Duncan Forrester has put it, in the “quality of relationships rather than in abstract principle, or a divine edict.”<sup>26</sup> This emphasis on embodied and enacted theology means that our truth is always contingent and provisional, constantly put to the test by its ability to bring hope and life; constantly judged against the lives of the non-persons. It also means that the language of theology is in the vernacular of human fellowship and unconditional Divine love; and Christian teaching is a human parable, rather than a set of moral prescriptions.

How might the Church achieve this? By being a particular kind of community, embodying a vision of service and support. For the people in places like Easterhouse, for example, ‘Church’ can become more than a body of propositional doctrine, more than empty ritual, but a place of vitality and hope, rooted in mutual respect and service. There is a moral vision here, in that people know and observe shared principles of right and wrong; it is not a romanticised view of community, but it is nevertheless rooted in precepts of justice, not charity and an understanding that it is worth organizing collectively in order to achieve greater participation, education and empowerment. Church-related renewal of community organizations might represent “new forms of popular democracy and participation in economic production and community governance ... many of them sustained by a spiritual vision of different faith communities working for social transformation at the grass roots.”<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, styles of being church that stress the eucharistic community emphasize the unconditionality and concretion of inclusion. The centrality of grace in this theology means that the open table is the basis of community, upon which individuality is then posed. Eucharistic community also places the question of sufficiency and distribution at its heart, expressing in sacramental and symbolic terms that all who wish to receive will do so equally. The grace of God does not require a Task Force, nor is it ‘targetted’ towards some groups and not others. It is simply offered in the form of human fellowship and divine *kenosis*.

This divine generosity does not confer a special status on any particular people, or set them apart as ‘special’ kinds of believers. This requires the Church to use its power and privilege wisely: as a human institution, no more and no less. It is also essential to be self-critical of structures of power and exclusion within the Church itself. Gender, homophobia, racism, moralistic judgements about family life – churches have frequently colluded with the strategies of blaming the victim and corroding self-esteem. It is simply about living out a commitment to human dignity, interdependence and insufficiency: and in that respect, it is, as Gutierrez says, about helping people to be more fully *human*. An Anglican priest I know, who has recently taken up a parish on a large public urban housing estate on the

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<sup>26</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.209

<sup>27</sup> Northcott, p. 192

edge of Manchester, said recently: “Sometimes we may have to forget about being the Church and get on with being good local residents and good citizens.”

At its best, however, Christian concern for social issues is rooted in the theological convictions of creation, incarnation and redemption. It seeks to found models of civil society that reflect the renewal of citizenship, individualism and community: perhaps a place where theological traditions fuel models of equity and empowerment. Congregational life in a modest way serving as models of ecclesial polity that prefigure renewed community.

If a liberating theology is to appear in Britain, it needs to begin in partnership with those who have experience at the sharp end of the dynamics and complexities of social exclusion. The churches will only be credible bearers of such theology if they are seen to practise what they preach, and in particular to embody a common life which enlarges our models of citizenship and community. But increasingly, the credibility of the Church's witness to the potential of such teachings in a fragmented and divided society will rest in its willingness to render words into flesh and become an incarnational community of vision and generosity.