**Fraternal traditions: Anglican Social Theology and Catholic Social Teaching in a British context**

When Pope Francis and Justin Welby met in Rome three years ago an unprecedented suggestion emerged: why not work together to produce a new ecumenical social teaching document? This proposal raises interesting questions, and it is notable that thus far this desire has not been realised.

Generally speaking answers to the question: what is shared between the Anglican and Catholic social traditions tend to focus on common readings of scriptural and patristic resources enabling a common affirmation of concepts such as human dignity, the value of institutions for securing the common good, and a preferential option for the poor. When the question is pushed to its limits however, the difference between the traditions is said to be located mainly in the status that can be given to such teaching: that is to say, in the more formal, magisterial claims made by CST to be an *official* body of teaching. This is contrasted with the more plural, contested and unofficial nature of the Anglican social tradition, indeed with the conscious Anglican liturgical and theological suspicion of appeals to magisterium[[1]](#footnote-1). However, I suspect that there are some more nuanced and interesting things that can be said about the actual and possible relationship between them.

Whilst Anglican social thought does not have official documents it has produced an impressive cloud of Anglican social witnesses across evangelical, liberal and Anglo-Catholic Anglican movements: from Coleridge and R.H. Tawney to William Temple and John Neville Figgis and in our own times Desmund Tutu and Rowan Williams. It is possible to identify not only key figures but also key themes that have dominated Anglican social *practice*. Emerging in particular out of Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical wings of Anglicanism in the 19th and 20th centuries, theological reflection addressed (notably but not exclusively) the realities of slavery, unemployment, housing, racism, wages and debt, creating a distinctive Anglican body of thought. Perhaps unsurprisingly we should also note that Anglican social thought has been particularly defined by its concern for the relationship between the national community, state and market. Liberal Anglicanism has tended to view the nation-state and its civic institutions as a foundational entity, and whilst it is far from ‘nationalistic’, it has made very significant contributions to the building up of a Christian notion of a national society. William Temple adopted in his own work classic Liberal Anglican views on the two pillars of Church and State as the basis for an organic, moral national community. Whilst his view of the state changed across time, he adopted a consistent view of the importance of nationality as a gift from God and the role of the nation in divine Providence. The building blocks of the social order, as articulated in analogical form in Temple were: family, associations, nation, and family of nations. For Temple, as for Arnold before him, both family and nation are direct gifts from God, the Pauline first fruits of the kingdom. Temple repeats an earlier Anglican analogy between person and nation in which nations were understood to possess a kind of ‘corporate personality’, and builds on his earlier 1915 assertion: ‘if we believe in a divine providence…. we shall confess that the nation as well as the Church is a divine creation’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Developed in part in reaction to the rise of the French Revolution CST adopted a less benign view of the life of the nation-state and has focused more on the local and global, with the most significant attention paid to the questions which have attended industrialisation, modern militarisation and globalisation: economic systems, international development, relations of labour and capital in the context of work, migration, food security, the environment and war, and a critique of the main theories of what it means to be human which structure the philosophies of modernity: liberalism, capitalism and communism. (As a rider to this comment, this is not meant to deny the profound practical connections between Catholicism, nationalism and even militarism that survive; it just they find not legitimating ground in contemporary CST. Such connections die with the French Gallican tradition). Prior to the Second Vatican Council CST focused primarily on an account of the body politic more broadly: associations, groups, structures of governance. The Conciliar and encyclical documents *Gaudium et Spes,* *Pacem in Terris and Dignitatis Humanae* are the first to engage with liberal democracy more systematically, but they tend to focus on questions of democracy and human rights, and consistently deploy the more Thomist language of ‘the political community’ rather than ‘state’ or ‘nation’. Such a difference of emphasis derives in part from a different understanding of political anthropology: Anglican social theology has remained more influenced by a Protestant tradition (Augustinian and Lutheran) which views politics as primarily post-lapsarian, as a consequence of sin, CST remains committed to a Thomist tradition which views political community as rooted in a pre-lapsarian account of the good, as well as consequent upon human sin.

The differences in emphasis between the two traditions have produced strengths and weaknesses that act as mirror opposites. CST has tended to engage at the level of the global and local more readily and has been impressive in its range of engagement on issues that relate to life in a globalised context: migration, food security, international governance and conflict. However, CST often appears weaker in its reflection on the reality of moral and spiritual challenges present in negotiating law-making in (democratic) national contexts, attends less to the role of mezzo-level political and economic institutions, and arguably underplays its hand in relation to the task and nature of modern democratic institutions. Whilst it possesses an inspirational set of reflections on the common good, at a meta-level it often fails to follow through with a more concrete account of how conflicts between goods can be reflected on and negotiated at a more intermediate level. Anglican social reflection has tended to focus on the national context and the issues faced by communities and policy makers in negotiating the common good in local and national contexts. Some of its best work has come from reflection on specific national economic questions. Its major reports and commissions have addressed issues primarily at this level, and bridging the local and national has been a constant and crucial Anglican vocation. In each tradition these areas might be considered significantly strengthened and weakened political-ecclesial muscles, in need of some work as the basis of a more fully engaged (and ecumenical) social theology.

These differences in emphasis are notable of course, not solely because they are markers of the two traditions but also because it is precisely this relationship of local and national community to state and global market that is currently being shaken to its core: on welfare, the economy, levels of social and economic inequality, on questions of the relation of local, national and global citizenship, conflict and scarcity and the role of public and civic institutions. We live in times of profound civic and social ferment – this is a global pattern.

Having noted all too briefly some areas of difference, I want also now to note some areas of commonality that are sometimes overlooked. Evangelical theologian Jonathan Chaplin argues for the following as normative Anglican social commitments: a common belief in “the dignity, freedom and rights of the human person, the embeddedness of the person in a fabric of social obligations, relations and communities, and the purpose of the state to promote justice and the common good.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Chaplin rightly emphases that these are not claims *unique* to Anglicanism, but rather their *combination* and *interpretation* has had a uniquely Anglican flavour.

In this light, the following can be said to form a common Anglican-Catholic social bond. Firstly, and most obviously, AST and CST share a foundational doctrinal emphasis on an inalienable and dynamic concept of human dignity, sociality, freedom and rights rooted in a Scriptural anthropology rather than an Enlightenment political anthropology. Secondly, the two traditions share an ecclesiological insistence on the inherent social and political character of both the Gospel and the Church. Thirdly, both traditions have placed particular soteriological and eschatological emphasis on the importance of nurturing intermediate civil associations, practicing a relational associational life and valuing virtuous institutional life. In both traditions institutions are a necessary feature of society and act structurally as contexts that can be infected by sin and transformed by virtue. Both traditions value voluntarism and civil associationalism for *theological reasons*: for the sake of a necessary participation of all in a transcendent common good and as necessary context for learning the exercise of virtue. Put more starkly: plural associationalism is seen as a practice of *communion*. The common good is a language not of consensus and utility but of communion in both traditions.

This shared emphasis corresponds to a basic insistence that human personality and Christian kinship is developed through membership and participation in community and society. For properly *theological* reasons, power and participation in economic and educational life and healthcare have been particularly dominant ‘social justice’ concerns for both traditions: unemployment matters not simply as a ‘social’ problem but because it threatens the Christian vocation to develop personality and virtue through social and economic participation.

I am fascinated by the fact that BOTH Anglican and Catholic social traditions have a version of teaching on subsidiarity but don’t talk much about this commonality. Perhaps this is because it is a theme most visible in pre-war Anglican social teaching. (Note irony that Anglicans seem to have forgotten their own tradition!) Both traditions emphasize the dual role of subsidiarity: the development of the human person towards virtue and communion and the necessity of voluntary and intermediate associations to the(?) health of the state or political community. The reduction in the number and health of intermediary associations tends to feed the dangerous temptation to view the state or the market as an alternative source of salvation. For Anglican Pluralists, groups and associations (and not solely Christian ones…, we should be clear) provided contexts for the formation of judgement and meaningful ways of learning to exercise responsibility and practice virtue in community. The state could not possibly achieve what freely associating persons could. For similar reasons CST has emphasised that subsidiarity implies taking decisions as close as possible to those who will be affected, dispersing power to the level most appropriate for effective change and where decision making can most aid human solidarity. Subsidiarity is also – for figures like Dorothy Day – the works of mercy performed by individual believers as a counter to the works of war and capital. However, subsidiarity can work both to push decisions downwards or towards the state or supra-national level where solidarity and the option for the poor can best be served by higher levels of governance. International processes for economic justice, ecological justice and management of migrant flows are key examples for the contemporary Church of areas where subsidiarity might imply pushing *up* as well as *down* the political/social order. Decisions at this level will need careful justification because the further away decisions are taken from those affected, the more opportunity for power that lacks accountability, a sense of participation or effectiveness. Subsidiarity, often seen as a pragmatic and administrative sort of principle, in fact has much deeper theological roots in both traditions. It implies a bias in favour of a biblical visions of justice as a relational and personal process that maximises human exchange, participation and reciprocity; subsidiarity is therefore a crucial part of how we learn the habits of virtue and how we exercise justice and charity.

**Shared challenges**

And given that time in short: now back to where we started: I suspect that we should talk not only of the shared resources of our traditions, but also the act of common discernment in the present: how we read together the signs of the times. That is what the IARCCUM bishops have been doing together in pilgiramge from Canterbury to Rome these last few days. These days have reaffirmed my belief we are witnessing a remarkable overlap between contemporary Anglican and Catholic diagnoses of our current social malaise. Inequality, the morality of markets, trafficking and migration, the condition of work, the growth of a military-industrial complex have been shared concerns for both Archbishop Welby and Pope Francis and our bishops. One way of responding to this is to promote joined-up theological reflection and common action on these core emerging themes: migration, money, debt and the financial system, sovereignty, governance and corruption, unemployment and the future of work, poverty, security and conflict, ecology. But there is also a pressing need to develop further reflection on an area both traditions have so far been weaker in responding to: including the social, political, economic and ecological experience of women. From Syria to Ukraine, from USA to Hong Kong, we need to confront the fact that neither state nor market are benign forces in our world. But we also need to remain grounded in a truth which is properly theological: that we act because God first acts for us and with us. The first social action is God’s not ours, our first social action is one of receptivity. This ‘heady’ sounding claim is made real in the disruptive and unifying lives of those holy men and women being recognised as saints for our time: Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa and perhaps in time Dorothy Day have spoken these truths with their lives and in Romero’s case through his death. We seek a communion that will inevitably take us by way of the cross. To quote one of our bishops, dying together that we might rise together.

The last two Popes and Archbishops of Canterbury have provided significant new impetus for the social theologies of their traditions. Rowan Williams and Justin Welby have moved towards a more globally engaged Anglican social ethic. Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have moved towards a CST less Eurocentric, more attentive to the global South and more interested in the discernment and subsidiary action of national and regional episcopal groupings. These are welcome and necessary moves. Drawing on Karl Barth and John Neville Figgis, Rowan Williams has chosen to focus less on providential nationhood and more on the role of the Church in a religious and ethnically pluralist public square, and on the task of governance and a confrontation with the less than benign systems of states. Pope Francis calls for a greater recognition that the Church needs to engage in multiple levels of social dialogue for the sake of the common good. In pursuit of the common good the Church must both seek constructive public friendships with others who wish to pursue pathways to real social goods, and recognise that in a context of growing programmatic atheism and non-religious belief much of what we have to say about integral human development will be opposed or met with incredulity. We will be treated as the fools for Christ we are called to be. This is perhaps most apparent in what we have to say, mercy, mercy, mercy for the migrant, the unborn, the natural world, the endebted, the prisoner. What we say will send many away shaking their heads. William Temple asserted that a genuinely Catholic tradition never flees to the safety and purity of the catacombs, but rather stays to keep rendering its truth publicly to the end, even if it risks being forced back into the catacombs. Both Catholic and Anglican traditions are today reminding civic leaders of the utter seriousness of their task - at the same time as accepting that the primary witness of the Church may come increasingly through counter-cultural forms of ‘being with’ others. Such complex interactions between church and culture mean that we may need to find not only a common language to speak of the ways a society may use power, but also new ecumenical ways to explore resistance: resistance to forms of law that cannot be recognised as law. Our common action may involve new forms of non-action, of resistance and difficult solidarity.

It is noteworthy that Pope Francis has sought to integrate the pastoral and teaching functions of papacy to considerable effect, forming a global audience for the gospel. He understands the power of proximity, presence and gesture. His teaching documents have garnered an unprecedented readership, but it is the interactive, pastoral and homiletic form that has proved so powerfully catechetical, far beyond the formal boundaries of the Church. Both Archbishop Welby and Pope Francis have carved out a sense that they are able and willing to lead, in an age that is highly suspicious of religious leadership. This is no mean feat. But history teaches us that genuine vibrancy in the social traditions of each ecclesial community require much more than impressive action at the top. Strong Christian formation, lay activism and a practical ecumenism build through real solidarity. If there is a question for theologians and Church leaders in both traditions it is surely to find ways to renew the social practice of both communities aided by relationships of practical collaboration and dialogue at every level of the institutional Church – and preferably beyond. The necessary renewal of spiritual and temporal institutions presents us with a set of surprisingly similar challenges: to reconfigure our practices of participation, association and communion ad intra and ad extra.

1. The very idea that there is a body of ‘Anglican social thought’ is of course contested, and so I refer in this article to an Anglican social tradition, but for ease of reference through the piece do use the acronym ‘AST’ when referring to this plural and contested body of work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We should note here that whilst CST does not produce the same theology of history as Temple, there are questions that should now be raised about the Catholic theology of history present in *Gaudium et Spes*. Attention to, and theological reevaluation of, the theology of history in both traditions seems a contemporary necessity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jonathan Chaplin, ‘*Person, Society and State in the Thought of Rowan Williams*’, unpublished paper, Von Hügel Institute, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)