

FAITH
AND
THOUGHT

(Published 1980) 1979

vol. 106

Nos. 2/3

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research

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PROGRESS, MANIPULATION, AND THE WELFARE STATE

Dr. Lyon argues that social attitudes to the Welfare State are in many respects idolatrous with the result that, as with idolatry in all its forms, much harm as well as good results. This paper was the first to be presented at the VI Symposium on IDEOLOGY AND IDOLATRY IN BRITISH SOCIETY on 19 May, 1979.

'We've never had it so good' was the slogan of the new-welfare-state in the 1950s. That slogan was based on certain beliefs, in particular beliefs about progress as the application of science to human welfare. A kind of political salvation was vested in the welfare state, but it has not been realized. We still await Professor Titmuss's dream of a 'welfare society'.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the welfare state has ameliorated major hardships and relieved many symptoms of social sores, and I would not wish to do so. But I do suggest that the faith of those welfare-optimists was misplaced. Both the slogan 'we've never had it so good' and the very term 'welfare state' are glosses on some specific social relationships and beliefs. When this is recognized, it is also possible to see that the very apparatus designed to control and to conquer Beveridge's five giants (squalor, want, ignorance, disease, and idleness) has itself begun to control us.

This paper is by way of being an experiment in interpretation. There is a classic tradition of Christian social thinking which focuses on 'idolatry' as a means of describing (and by the same token partly explaining) social institutions, movements, and events. The prophetic denunciation of idolatry in ancient Israel has from time to time been revived as a means of exposing social (and personal) ills.

The essence of idolatry is that something within the created order becomes an object of worship (Is. 44: 9-20) which is trusted, and raises expectations. Though a human artefact, (Is. 2: 8; 40: 18-20) it becomes a spiritual force to be reckoned with (1 Cor. 10: 20), and in time it controls its worshippers. These

become afflicted with a certain blindness to reality, accepting as true totally false ideas (Hab. 2: 18) and in some respects become like their idols (Jer. 2: 5).

Andrew Kirk suggests that idolatry today may be any *Weltanschauung* based on a belief in human autonomy.¹ Vigo Demant, in his version of 'Christian sociology', speaks specifically about the idolatry behind capitalism. He insists that the ethos of capitalism is maintained by an innocent-looking set of business theories and warns that "it is pride which finds satisfaction in working a machine or system, and which continues to find conscientious reasons for working it even when it becomes divorced from human purposes." And pride blinds men to such divorce.²

Idolatry also features in Marx' analysis of social relationships. He spoke of money as a secular god, an 'alien essence' which dominates people as they adore it.³ In its developed form this idea is known as the 'fetishism of commodities'. "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."⁴ What are these? Put simply, they are human relationships which are regarded objectively as if they were commodities. People introject qualities of life and purpose into relationships which are their own creation. I wish to suggest that something of this kind is applicable to the welfare state.

Welfare as Progress

The whole triumphal approach to welfare in the 1940s was suggestive of religious commitment. Beveridge was 'fighting giants' who had to be conquered. The welfare state was born in a wave of post-war optimism about 'reconstruction', and faith in human fraternity. The pre-war depression was destined to be reduced to a mere memory — a bad dream. The new dream was a different one: 'You've never had it so good'. Yet even in the 1950s that slogan veiled much human misery and deprivation untouched by welfare.⁵

Why do I associate the term 'progress' with the welfare state? Because although progress is not often mentioned today, belief in its reality is undoubtedly connected with the history of welfare in Britain.⁶ Belief in progress was a key motif in the Enlightenment and in all subsequent humanistic thought. It is both supported by, and a catalyst to, the application of science to human welfare.⁷ The title of Henry George's important late nineteenth century book, *Progress and Poverty*⁸ is significant here. The two notions were felt by many to be incompatible. It was disgraceful that widespread poverty, at that time being dramatically exposed to the horror of the

Victorian bourgeoisie, should be allowed to coexist alongside vaunted material-industrial progress.

Welfare provision in Britain has emerged as a contradictory process. The values which have brought capitalist society into being are incompatible with the community-spirit and selflessness assumed in the welfare outlook. Though some social democrats have felt that the welfare state is an egalitarian measure, it has also long been realized that it coexists with great inequality. In 1950 T.H. Marshall pointed out that the rights of a citizen provide "the foundation of equality on which the structure of inequality could be built".^{6a} The progress in which the makers of the welfare state believed in is of a kind that reduces major inequalities, but fails to produce equality. (See note added in proof)

The idea that the welfare state was progressive and fraternal was widespread in the 1940s. The sober *Times*, for example, carried an editorial on July 1st 1940 which spoke glowingly of the 'new order' which would soon characterise Britain. Equitable distribution of wealth, the right of all men to live and work, and an end to class and individual privilege — this was to be the new order. Those who criticise the welfare state have only to measure success in terms of the actual legislation of the 1940s in order to support their case. Beveridge's giants, though weakened, are still alive and well. And curiously enough, the debate is *still* carried on in terms of 'progress'. For example, Vic George and Paul Wilding frequently use the word 'progress' where 'change' would do.⁹ Though they can discern little progress since the 1940s, they clearly believe that, given their approach to the problems, progress is possible.

Again, I must stress that I am not simply taking a negative view of the institution of welfare in our society. Many social evils have been reduced by the welfare state. But I argue that a kind of political salvation was vested in it, especially during that euphoric era of post-war reconstruction. The very fact that the Beveridge Report was an immediate best-seller in 1942 is further evidence of this. Faith in progress, bolstered at that time, has been strongly maintained ever since. And if this assertion is true, we may also expect the corollary of idol-worship also to be manifest in the welfare state. Control is the idol. Idols tend to take over the lives of their worshippers. Has this in fact occurred?

Welfare as Manipulation

Jurgen Habermas argues convincingly that the contemporary state is undergoing a crisis of legitimation.¹⁰ That which commands national loyalty, and converts power into authority is lacking. Once upon a time market forces legitimated the

distribution of resources in capitalist society. But the market proved inherently unstable, and the state intervened increasingly. In advanced societies the state virtually replaces the market as the steering-mechanism of capitalism. The institution of welfare, I shall argue, illustrates Habermas' point very well.

But what makes the new state legitimate? The imperatives of scientific-technical progress is the answer. Technical experts must run society along rational lines. The logic of scientific progress determines the development of the social system. Here are echoes of Jacques Ellul, and also the more recent work of Egbert Schuurman.¹¹ Ultimate questions of how people ought to live are excluded: manipulation by experts is the order of the day. Pragmatism rather than principle rules.

I do not intend to explore the crisis of legitimation here. Habermas shows how intrusion into (and therefore politicization of) 'private' areas of life leads to a contradiction. On the one hand the capitalist state wishes to be a law unto itself, excluding the masses from decision-making. On the other, its very intervention raises expectations and political hope. He argues, also, that motivation decreases under state influence and that this further erodes legitimation.

So how does welfare operate? Feminists such as Elizabeth Wilson argue vehemently that both life-styles and life's opportunities are severely restricted by welfare practices. It is welfare ideology which brings this about. For Wilson, this is seen above all in social work: "The literature of social work is the ideology of welfare capitalism."¹² The technical expert syndrome is clearly seen here. When psychotherapy, counselling and casework fail, 'family sculpting', 'crisis intervention' and 'systems theory' are brought in and pragmatic change is fetishized. The latest fashion is to describe social workers as 'change-agents'.

How is all this manipulatory? The assumption which underlies so much of the literature of social work is that 'clients' are inadequate, and are especially impoverished because their vocabulary is too limited to describe their problems. The social workers know best.

But there are other ways, sometimes less obvious, in which welfare, rather than creating a more human *Lebensraum*, manipulates its beneficiaries. Let us briefly examine three areas. Two affect everyone: the medicalization of motherhood and the takeover of educational responsibility by the state. The third affects an ever increasing number of people, those dependent upon social security.

The rapid increase, over the past few decades, of intervention in motherhood, has had several effects. On the one hand, lives which otherwise might have been lost have been saved through the use of induction or surgical techniques. But at the same time, the natural process of having a baby has been transformed out of all recognition. The health services, originally intended to fight giant disease, have themselves become a giant to be fought. (Note, for example, not only the increase of inductions in general, but also their decrease over weekends and at bank holidays!) In short, motherhood has been medicalized.¹³

Having a baby which, crudely speaking, before the coming of the National Health Service was a natural occurrence, is now a medical business. Diagnosis and treatment are now meted out to women who, though apparently fit, are defined as ill. Women have lost the store of social knowledge which used to be passed from mother to daughter, and have to rely instead on magazines and ante-natal clinics for information. Medical control, while it may have made some births safer, also appears to produce anxiety and a sense of helplessness.¹⁴ It may also be, as Raij and Nilsson suggest, that medicalization helps to account for the increasing incidence of post-natal depression.^{14a} Welfare thus begins to control us.

My second example concerns education. Once again, while certain minimal improvements in educational opportunity do seem to have occurred since 1944, welfare provisions in this area have got out of hand. The state seems intent on denying the very principles enshrined in the 1944 Butler Education Act. The result is that educational responsibility is seen as a province, not of parents, but of a state-controlled system.

Despite the myth (often supported by the popular media¹⁵) that children have to be schooled away from their parents, the 1944 provisions still stand. Parents are seen there to be responsible for their children's education, and they choose (in theory) who will be delegated with schooling responsibility. The minister and LEAs are to see that 'pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents'.¹⁶ Yet one suspects that few parents realize that this God-given responsibility is supported by British law — and even fewer take up the opportunity.

Moreover, the idea of a system which would increase parental responsibility meets with a cold reception today. Frank Musgrave, one of our education experts, writes, "It is the business of education in our social democracy to eliminate the influence of parents... We have decided that children shall not be at the mercy of their parents. It is the business of the LEAs to see that they are not."¹⁷ But when some parents in Ashford, Kent, were given a chance of airing their views on parental control *via* a voucher

system, 90% indicated their belief in the desirability of parental choice. That such opinions are still held is evidence of a huge gap between the 'welfare' state and the people. But it is not merely a matter of the powerlessness of the electorate. The system, despite itself, seems to aim at control and manipulation. It is impossible even to ask whether the state should or should not be responsible for the education of children. Such are the wages of progress.

Lastly, we glance at the matter of dependency. I am referring to those, mainly among the poor in the working classes, who are vulnerable to manipulation by the welfare system. In a broad sense, it may be said that a large number of the poor in the working classes find themselves dependent upon the bureaucracy of welfare - staffed mainly by the educated middle classes. The class nature of poverty and welfare is accentuated here.

Western society assumes that people, given time and effort, can make a success of their lives. The American Dream, writ small, is a common British belief as well. But for those who are poor, and dependent on welfare and state income, this is manifestly not true. People come to feel powerless and controlled by their circumstances. W. Haggstrom in *The Power of the Poor* describes them as having "very little scope for action, in the sense of behaviour under their control which is central to their needs and values"¹⁸. Withdrawal, apathy, resignation and hopelessness may set in among those dependent upon the welfare state.

Poverty, in particular, gives rise to a sense of hopelessness and lack of control. Haggstrom also notes another response to this situation; opposition: "People tend either to retreat from or to attack forces controlling their lives which they cannot affect." The welfare services themselves may in fact perpetrate poverty, and give the poor a strong sense that they are not in control of their lives (though the impression may be given that they are responsible for their poverty).

What I am arguing here is that welfare serves to prop up this system by keeping a certain pool of people dependent. The 'poverty trap' is one such obvious mechanism. This is a unique dilemma of the poor. If they go out to work to increase their income they may, at certain levels, find they lose some means-tested benefits, and end up worse off than before. Little wonder they feel manipulated - by 'welfare'.

These kinds of arguments may be extended to other welfare fields. Beveridge's fight against giant squalor, for example, while it has reduced overcrowding and homelessness, and improved standards, has hardly increased choice. One's class-position largely determines the kind of housing in which one lives, and

this is reinforced by housing policy. Again and again the argument is illustrated. People believed in the welfare state and trusted it to provide benefits but it has proved to be a Janus-faced god. One face hands out benefits and alleviates distress. The other cultivates dependency and reduces personal control and responsibility.

Welfare as Ideology

It is insufficient to expose idolatry. Alternatives must be spelled out. The prophet Jeremiah warned against 'learning the ways of the nations'. Idols, he insisted, are a 'discipline of delusion' (Jer. 10: 2,8). His confession, following this, is "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but with justice." (Jer. 10: 23,24)

However, it is noteworthy that in keeping away from idols, God's people were not therefore to withdraw from surrounding society into a ghetto. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon explicitly refers to their positive task within a culture of different ethos from theirs: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find welfare." (Jer. 29: 7) The Lord had future plans for the fuller welfare and hope of his people. *Shalom* would one day be realized. But for the present they were to seek the *shalom*-welfare of their immediate neighbourhood in the city. Disciples of Christ today are to be the salt of the earth. Not by withdrawing out of the welfare state into a ghetto, but by seeking the welfare of their own cities. Perhaps as a spin-off there will be welfare for the kingdom-community in the welfare of our society.

Ideology has already been mentioned. It is part of the 'discipline of delusion' of idolatry. There is a clash in our day between the ethos of capitalism (in its pure form) and the welfare ethos. And yet it is within capitalism that welfareism has grown up. The liberal ideals of capitalist society — self-help, individualism, competition, achievement and trust in those who handle our money¹⁹, along with the belief that the market system of distribution is inherently just, — these make up capitalist society's ideology.

In part to mitigate capitalism's own excesses, the ethos of welfarism has emerged. Here mutual aid (helping others), cooperation, communal achievement, and a concern for the community at large are seen to be the keys. Socialist critics of the welfare state such as George and Wilding hope for these kinds of changes. They rightly press for a "reconsideration of fundamental social objectives" following the failure of the piecemeal

pragmatism of the last thirty years of social administration in Britain.^{9a}

George and Wilding elaborate on the arguments of John Rawls and Gary Runciman on the meaning of justice and equality. The ideal is equality. All inequalities should have to be justified. The test, according to Runciman, "is whether they can be justified to the losers; and for winners to be able to do this, they must be prepared, in principle, to change places."²⁰ These theories are highly attractive and superficially plausible, but it is difficult to see how they would work out in practice.²¹ Beyond this, moreover, both George/Wilding and Rawls/Runciman begin from the premise that there are no objectively right or wrong principles for welfare. Their ideology is as unprincipled as that of capitalism. George and Wilding go a long way towards finding a definition of 'need', rightly stressing both expert and popular evaluation. They also make helpful comments on a comparative approach. But behind it all is their wistful longing for a 'new ideology', which will ensure that people begin to think communally, fairly, and put themselves willingly in others' shoes. It is a hope which on their terms will ever remain unfulfilled.

Over against this, the Christian social analyst may argue a different case. Rather than exchanging one idolatry for another, the Christian view begins with a rejection of the notion of human ethical autonomy. We cannot know what is best for human welfare, however well we balance grass-roots expertise, and comparative approaches to need if that is all we do. It has to be revealed to us. A biblical perspective on welfare must be brought to bear on the ideological arena of social policy. Thus the welfare of the city in which Christians find themselves may be sought. Tentatively and humbly, and recognizing past failure, yes, but also with the assurance that the Lord's requirements speak to today's social situation.

Societal and Local Welfare

The theme of this paper has been that the idea of a welfare state became an object of worship. As such, it shows signs of a creeping control of its worshippers. Whilst acknowledging the rightful place for the intervention of the state in the cause of justice, it can be argued that in many ways locally based community care has thus been bypassed. Rather than maintaining local, face-to-face, relationships with people in need, welfare has become highly bureaucratized, impersonal, and dehumanizing.²² Talk of the 'welfare state' then, must ever be in the twin context of societal and local welfare. The church has much to offer at the local level, and there are also various means whereby Christians may also foster national welfare.

In addition, it must never be forgotten by Christians that a biblical notion of welfare (*shalom*) is not restricted to those who are in special need (though particular aid is to be extended to them). The comfortable and affluent may be totally lacking in *shalom*. Christians ought to press for a concept of welfare which transcends the merely financial — a trap into which many welfare ideologies fall. As Stanley Carlton-Thies has put it: "Only a direct concern with well-being in all areas of life can promise a fulfillment of hopes signalled originally by the welfare state: the chance of well-being for all citizens. *Shalom* can only come from a harmonious development of all sides of life for all."²³

The welfare of which Jeremiah spoke was, in Hebrew, *shalom*. That is, a fulness of life-relationships and opportunities (horizontal, between persons, and vertical, between persons and God). This, though we may not expect its realization in the here-and-now, is nevertheless the model for Christian hope. (The source of that hope, of course, is God himself.) In its full sense, Jesus came to bring *shalom* through His cross (Eph. 2: 13-14). He came to proclaim good news to the poor (Is. 61: 1 and Lk. 4: 16-20), which means that His message speaks, as the catechism puts it, to both human sin and misery.²⁴

This lack of distinction between 'spiritual' and 'practical' life is part of the whole Old Testament understanding of *shalom*. As Chris Wright has shown, proper welfare had to do with a right relationship with God, the family, the nation, and the land.²⁵ Moreover, he shows that economic forces, created and accelerated by greed and oppression, led to the break-up of the land-family-nation relationship, and therefore the breakup of moral and spiritual relationships as well. Those who bemoan the moral degeneracy of British culture may not safely ignore its socio-economic dimension.

There are many principles enshrined in the Old Testament legislation for Israel which are readily translatable into the present-day language of welfare. (Which is not to say that one ignores the theocratic or the predominantly agrarian context into which this legislation was originally given. Nor is it to suggest that the Old Testament is the only source for such principles. They are simply more fully spelt out here than in the New Testament.) Positive discrimination, for example, has biblical roots. Measures are taken to ensure that those who are particularly disadvantaged do not simply 'tread water' when a universal benefit is proposed. Such are always special cases in the Old Testament. (See especially Deut. 15.)

Wright's conclusion, which has great relevance for social policy today, is that the ideal society of the Old Testament would have the following provisions: Families would have a measure

of economic independence based on an equitable share of the nation's wealth; they would feel their social relevance and significance in the community and would have opportunity to hear and to respond to the message of redemption. (See especially 1 Sam. 6.) Deeply engrained in the Old Testament ethos was opposition to the manipulation of families in the name of the state.²⁶

In order to demonstrate the relevance of Old Testament principles, we may glance briefly at the Supplementary Benefits Review. The committee started work in 1976: it published a report in 1978²⁷ which was under discussion in 1979. The arbitrariness and complexity of the present system comes in for considerable attack. The whole report aims at greater simplicity and straightforwardness. There is potential for decreased manipulation. So far, so good. But at the same time, it appears that those most in need (and who feel most manipulation) will not necessarily obtain more help if the report is accepted. In many cases, groups such as one-parent-families and the elderly may get less.²⁷

But welfare is not just money. Questions which relate directly to the need for families to feel social relevance and significance (as Wright puts it) are neglected. Stigma, and the related low take-up rate of many means-tested benefits, is undiscussed in the report. The feeling of helplessness experienced by so many claimants in the face of a massive bureaucratic machine is unlikely to be mitigated if the report is accepted. Rather, the ability of claimants to comment on their situation or to challenge official decisions may actually be weakened.

Here is an area for Christianly-directed and *shalom*-oriented concern. (Similar principles may be applied in other areas as well, including the aforementioned health and education.) It is a field of social analysis, interpretation, and action quite compatible with the biblical mandate of neighbour-love. It is a way in which the idolatry of progress and the manipulation by the state may be opposed. For no faith is placed in social policy or social reconstruction. Rather, faith remains firmly planted in the Lord whose ways are sought and practised. Faithfulness to Him, rather than commitment to some unrealizable goal, is the mark of Christian involvement. But at the same time, unless clear goals are articulated, based on biblical principle rather than human-autonomous pragmatism, there is every chance that the idol of the welfare state will simply tighten its grip.

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Note added in Proof.

The makers of the welfare state did, however, believe in fraternity. Progress in welfare was supposed to come through a new sense of the 'common good'. As Graham Room has pointed out (in his new book, *The Sociology of Welfare*) there existed a strong belief that social solidarity and moral commitment could be achieved via social reform. R.H. Tawney, remember, coined the phrase 'socialism as fellowship'. He, along with Titmuss, Marshall and others saw social integration as an essentially moral phenomenon. This has strong overtones of what Robert Bellah has termed 'civil religion'. The very legitimacy of a socio-political order is maintained by the use of religious language and themes.

