

Engaging the Powers

PART 4 LORD, WHAT SHALL WE DO?

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I am often puzzled by the continuous evidence of fellow-Christians weaving their ways in and out between two totally opposing cultures on a regular basis with apparent ease. I refer to the two utterly contrasting value systems which we hear espoused, on the one hand on a Sunday morning at Church and on the other, throughout the rest of the week in the secular world in which we all live.

I think a partial explanation is that we Christians in general go out into the world where we quietly pursue standards of behaviour which are not universally followed in the secular community; we are generous in giving to charity, friendly and considerate in our dealings with others; we live modestly and peacefully. This, surely, is following the teaching of Jesus as he would wish?

The title of this website project is *Engaging the Powers*; the title is borrowed from Walter Wink's book of the same title and this book is the subject of one of the four theological discussions in Part 2 of the project. As a shorthand way of referring to these discussions I have twice quoted a pithy saying by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: 'Christians are very good at fishing the bodies out of the river. They aren't so good at finding out how they go there in the first place'. I think this indicates very well that 'engaging the powers' may call for something more than mopping up after the Powers have passed by, wreaking havoc in their path. Compassionate and necessary though this response is, it fails to engage with the behaviour and mind-set of 'the Powers'.

It seems that 'Something more is required'.

Oh dear! What a demoralizing thought! 'I'm already doing all I can', many Christian will say. 'How can I be expected to try even harder, to do even more?' The crucial point here is that 'engaging the powers' does not mean doing more or trying harder'. It might even be a good idea *not* to try so hard and do less rather than more. No. What is being asked of us is to become more aware of the effect of 'the Powers' on society through their actions and their influence.

But 'looking at things differently' is an innocent-sounding phrase which carries some weighty baggage. To 'unpack' this 'baggage', I turn to Brian Walsh's

excellent book *Subversive Christianity* (1992). Walsh, a Canadian theologian, does an amazing job of delving into deep waters in an accessible way that doesn't leave those of us, the vast majority, who are neither trained theologians nor trained philosophers struggling. At an early stage in his argument he quotes the Epistle to the Ephesians (Chap.6 v.12):

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness.

Following the writer of Ephesians, Walsh now formulates the idea of a 'worldview'. Our worldview is the way we look at things in general. But as soon as we become familiar with the idea of a worldview, we come up against the realization that, as Christians, we are placed in the position of holding two worldviews at the same time and that these two views are fundamentally incompatible.

Says Walsh:

What is at stake here are fundamental allegiances – loyalty to different gods. Another way to say this is that Christians live out of a worldview or a vision of life that is different from the worldview that dominates Western culture as a whole. Simply stated, Western culture, like any cultural experiment in history, is rooted in an underlying and unifying worldview. That worldview, like all worldviews, tells a story.

The Western story is the myth of progress. This myth, which is the implicit religion of Western culture, sees history, beginning way back with Egypt and Greece (not India and China), as a story of cumulative development leading up to modern Western society. We are the culmination of the story. This story, this Western cultural myth, proclaims that progress is inevitable, if we only allow human reason freely and scientifically to investigate our world so that we can acquire the technological power to control that world in order to realize the ultimate human good, that is, an abundance of consumer goods and the leisure time in which to consume them.

This myth of progress is engraved in our high-school textbooks, proclaimed in corporate advertising, phallically erected in our downtown bank and corporation towers, propagated in our universities, assumed by our political parties... This myth idolatrously reduces human labour to the efficient exercise of power to produce maximum economic good. Serving the three gods of scientism, technicism and economism, our work lives...are subjected to *scientific* analysis by industrial engineers and a whole army of consultants, to determine the most efficient way to accomplish the task in hand, using the best and quickest *techniques* to attain the highest possible *economic* good. (*Subversive Christianity pp.15 and 16*)

In a later chapter, Walsh suggests that when things go seriously wrong within a given culture, we need to seek out our prophets who are able to look at the culture with a different eye and to point out what has gone astray. Amongst modern prophets, Walsh refers to Lesslie Newbiggin to whom we will turn later. For the moment he is drawing on the work of one, Bob Goodzwaard:

Goodzwaard describes the cultural imagination of the West, the spiritual driving force, or worldview of Western culture as dominated, and permeated, by a faith that believes that progress is inevitable if only we allow human reason freely and scientifically to investigate our world. Progress enables us to acquire the technological power necessary to control that world and bring about the ultimate human goal; economic affluence and security. This is a faith that can be described as a service to three false gods. Modern culture has entered into a covenant with an unholy trinity. Three good dimensions of creation...have been absolutised. They have been erected as idols and they demonically distort our cultural lives. These three are *scientism* (the belief that science provides us with authoritative knowledge and functions as an omniscient source of revelation in our culture), *technicism* (the effective translation of scientific knowledge into power and control of the creation which promises us a scientific-technical omnipotence, and *economism* (the golden head of the idol that believes that a rising standard of living is the ultimate goal of life and the only route to personal happiness and societal harmony). (*Subversive Christianity p.40*)

Continuing the discussion from pages 15 and 16, Walsh says:

It is in the context of this idolatry that we are called to be a Christian witness, because this economistic worldview does not just guide industry, the media and government in our society. More foundationally, this is the worldview which captivates the *imagination* of our society. We experience our lives in its terms. Looking at life with this worldview is as natural as breathing for us. Because, after all, it is in the air everywhere, and the churches provide no gas mask. (p.16)

Because this worldview defines reality for our life we simply *assume* that progress in science, technology and economics is our historical destiny. We simply *assume* that labour is a sellable commodity. We simply *assume* that labour relations are adversarial and that stockbrokers own the enterprise. We simply *assume* – it is self-evident, it needs no justification – that the goal of our labour is to raise our standard of living and that this standard can be measured by a growth in the GNP, by an increase in consumptive goods and the leisure time to consume them. And all of these assumptions are rooted in fundamental beliefs about the world we live in as ‘a planet for the taking’ – as resources waiting for exploitation – and beliefs about who we are as human beings and that our goal in life should be – *homo economicus* !

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In his first chapter, Brian Walsh has identified a fundamental malaise in our way of looking at things as a Christian community – at least as it can be seen in the North American countries and in Great Britain. Elsewhere, in Africa or South America, for instance, the problem will take a quite different shape. Having got this far, we hasten to, say, ‘OK, so what’s the solution?’ ‘Not so fast’, says Walsh. ‘Before we can discuss solutions we have to make a diagnosis’. This diagnosis forms the content of Walsh’s second chapter. He turns first to the words of the Canadian sociologist, Reginald Bibby in his book *Fragmented Gods*:

Canadians who are religiously committed...construct reality in much the same manner as others. They relate with neither more nor less compassion. They experience a level of well-being that is neither higher nor lower than other people’s.

Walsh takes this up:

What Bibby says of Canada, I suspect, is equally applicable throughout what was once called Christendom, certainly including the United States and the United Kingdom. If Bibby's analysis is right – if Christians, all of their idiosyncratic religious doctrines notwithstanding, really do construct reality in pretty much the same terms as everybody else; if, in fact, they relate to immigrants, single mothers, the poor, the handicapped and anyone else who is 'different' with neither more nor less compassion than others...then we are faced, as a church, and as individual Christians with a spiritual crisis of mammoth proportions. (*Subversive Christianity p.28*)

If all of this is true, then we are in a situation where we have to ask ourselves whether our Christian faith, our allegiance to Jesus, has any integrity at all. Or are we simply mouthing pious words, and going through pious motions that betray a hollow faith?...

Walsh continues:

The reason for this state of affairs – nothing less than a spiritual catastrophe in the Western church – is, I submit, the *enculturation* of the church. As a community of believers, and as individuals we have, mostly against our best intentions, been thoroughly sucked into our secular culture. That is what I mean by the term 'enculturation'...You see, while we were fighting with each other about evolution, the infallibility of the Bible, spiritual gifts, and various other hotly debated issues, we were falling into a deeper and deeper sleep in relation to the cultural captivity of our very consciousness. We were asleep to the secularisation of our lives and of our most fundamental values. (p.29)

He concludes:

At present, the church is virtually in a coma, asleep to its own cultural entrapment.

'But', asks Walsh, 'don't we espouse a transforming vision. Isn't our worldview one which affirms the lordship of Christ over all of life and insists that the battle line between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness permeates everything else?' Earlier, Walsh has alluded to the gap which he suspects most of us feel in our lives - a gap between our worldview and our way of life. He now asks the question, why?

The first answer, he suggests, leads us to the problem of dualism – 'that perverse way of looking at life that effectively splits life into two realms, one religious, the other secular'. On this basis, 'religion' and 'life' are seen as two separate affairs which do not impinge on each other. Walsh does not refer to the *historical* dimension of dualism but this view emerged in the course of the centuries of what is now referred to as Christendom, the age between the edict of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century which brought Church and State into alliance with each other, right up to the post World War II era. It conveniently ensured that those parts of the gospel which criticized 'the principalities and powers', particularly, of course, whoever happened to be our rulers, were neutralized by emphasizing the centrality of personal piety for Christians – don't meddle with big matters which are beyond your comprehension. From this sprang the misleading dictum: 'Jesus didn't do politics'. That age is not so far distant; plenty of people still alive today were brought up in it.

Walsh has two insights about the adverse effects of a dualistic outlook on the state of affairs in which the Western church finds itself today. First:

Perhaps we Christians tend towards dualism precisely because the claim of our sovereign lord is so radical, so all-encompassing, indeed, so total. Before such a God, dualism seems like a safe place. This God wants too much. If only we could limit his divine claim on our lives, if only we could domesticate God a little... While a split life is disintegrating and not whole, it is *more comfortable* than the radical obedience that might entail the cross, *more safe* than a discipleship which calls us to risk all for Jesus' sake. (pp.30/31)

But there is a second reason for the persistence of dualism amongst people who espouse a 'transforming vision'... Could it be that the form of our dualism, the particular character of a reformational (Protestant) faith that buys into the universal Christian problem of dualism, is that our worldview is primarily conceived in terms of intellectual categories? Could it be that our problem (and trust me when I say *our* problem, I mean it) is intellectualism?... (p.31)

Remember here that this is a professor writing these words. Intellectual reflection is my bread and butter. So please do not hear what I am saying as anti-intellectual. What I am concerned with is not intellectual activity per se, but with intellectualism – that is, the intellectualisation of Christian faith to such a degree that professing Christ becomes a matter of saying 'I do' to a system of theological dogmas rather than 'I do' to a bridegroom named Jesus who wants to enter into a relationship of passionate covenant-keeping with you and me.

So, the Western Protestant churches are in a state of deep crisis, imprisoned in a secular worldview which is quite contrary to the way of Jesus Christ. But it is not only the churches which are in this unfortunate situation. Secular society itself is, of course, similarly entrapped. Indeed, secular society is in a worse position than the churches because there is not for it an alternative vision, an alternative worldview waiting in the wings. For both the churches and secular Western society have come to see money and its directing discipline of economics as the central driving force of human existence, whilst the staggering success of science and technology over the past few hundred years have led to the illusion that humans are in ultimate and exclusive control of their own destiny.

Walsh addresses this situation:

Since our analysis is diagnostic, we are concerned with the relative health or sickness of this cultural vision of life. Such diagnosis requires spiritual discernment that is historical in character. We need to discern the times. Where are we in our cultural history? (p.35)

It is important to realize here that while this kind of diagnosis will require the use of all the intellectual tools and academic disciplines at our disposal (from biology to physics, to psychology, sociology, literature, philosophy and economics) and therefore requires interdisciplinary reflection, essentially this diagnosis is not *an academic matter*. Academic reflection is indispensable to our determination of the diagnosis but *at heart* this analysis requires a *spiritual* discernment that is not reducible to academic reflection...

If we are to discern spirits then we will need to be filled, renewed, transformed, enlightened and led by the Spirit of God. And such fullness, renewal, transformation, enlightenment and leading cannot occur apart from a profound

grasp of (and being grasped by) the biblical worldview. This is what we would call a spiritually renewed imagination – an imagination which is enlightened by the Word of God...

He goes on:

To discern spirits is to know that humans, being created in the image of God, necessarily worship graven images when they turn their backs on their Creator and Redeemer. Therefore, Christian cultural discernment must be attuned to any and all forms of idolatry. It is an analysis that seeks out idols and discerns their demonic distortion of human life.

Further, to engage in spiritual/cultural diagnosis requires that we have a sense of what spiritual/cultural health or wholeness looks like. For this we need wisdom. That is, we need to grasp and be grasped by the wise ways of the Lord in creation.

And then,

Another way to describe the nature of the diagnosis that we are working on here is to say that we are engaged in prophecy. Indeed, when a culture is following idols, and the covenant community I am asleep in its enculturation, what we need is a prophetic vision. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that ‘The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us’... (p.36)

As unpopular and controversial as it may seem, prophetic vision must start with criticism. That is why God told Jeremiah that he must ‘pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow’ *before* he can ‘build and plant’... (Jer.1:10)

The work of the prophet

The prophet must speak with passion because the community is in a coma. Or to shift the metaphor, we are numb. To be numb is to be without passion; it is the absence of pathos; it is a-pathy. We are so numb that we don’t even realize what has happened to us. Our numbness denies us of a spiritually renewed imagination. We are numb so we don’t notice the perverse abnormality of affluence. We are numb to the precariousness of our times, numb to the danger of the earth, to the pain of the poor, to the impossibility of our affluent lifestyles... And, yes, we are numbed out by the irrelevance of the church to our present cultural malaise...(pp.36/37)

Numbness sets in when we deny our real situation. And the prophetic task is to cut through the numbness with passion and to penetrate our self-deception... And the way in which the prophet breaks through this dream world is *not* by angry denunciation...but by anguish, tears and public mourning. (p.37)

The prophet brings to public expression the pain of the community that numbness covers up. The prophet weeps over Judah, weeps over Jerusalem, weeps over Western culture, weeps over the church...She has, like Jeremiah looked for peace but found none; looked for healing, but found only terror (Jer.8:15)...she knows that ‘the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. (Jer.8:22)

Or, turning from the beautiful figurative language of the Old Testament to the down-to-earth specifics of our own day, Walsh comes to talk about the

environmental crisis, a glaring example of collective apathy, of numbness in the face of an unfolding disaster which is too big for us to come to terms with:

While nations of the world have been cognisant of this problem for decades, and particularly in the last ten to fifteen years, the environmental destruction of the earth, despoliation of nature, urbanization and resource depletion have *increased*, not decreased over this period of time. This is the failure of economism, or better, this is the ironic success of economism. As expansionary economic ethic necessarily destroys the earth. An economics that knows nothing of contentment, of 'enough', necessarily sacrifices the environment (and especially the environment of others) in order to satiate its greed. (p.43)

So, faced with a cosmic, global catastrophe which is getting closer day by day, we are being called to weep with the prophets. 'Oh!' says worldly-wise material man, 'what a feeble response!'. Weeping won't get you anywhere. What are you going to DO about it?' Quite wrong and quite inadequate! We demonstratively have no idea what to do because we can't face up to the seriousness of the situation. However, there are, indeed, plenty of human beings who make up a vanguard ahead of unmoved general public opinion; they contribute all sorts of ideas on how to deal with the situation. Some of them look for a great technological fix – human beings are clever enough to come up with answers to every problem that the natural world presents; this is no different. Trust us! Others, with more humility work for a more urgent implementation of the measures which we know need to be taken but which governments, for economic and political reasons, are reluctant to implement. Some point to the damage already being done in hotter climates where the poor are paying the price for the self-indulgence of the richer nations.

These are human responses. But we Christians are being called to weep, to repent and to start listening, through the words of the prophets both ancient and modern, to what God has to say. And what he has to say is 'You must start to look at things differently; you must look at them my way, as the prophets and the scriptures describe'.

Brian Walsh puts it like this, using the words of Walter Brueggemann:

If we are, in fact, in a situation in which the worldview of our culture is in decline; if its cultural imagination has run dry and all we can do is mouth the old formulae about a life of prosperity for all; if that situation is exacerbated by our own captivity to the impotent imagination of our culture, then what we most desperately need is a spiritually renewed imagination. This is what Brueggemann calls a *prophetic imagination*. (p.45)

You see, for a prophet, or for a prophetic community, the first question is never whether a vision or a worldview is realistic, viable, practical implementable. If that is our first question, then this is simply an indication of how our imaginations are held captive by a pragmatic, materialistic and secular culture. No, our question must be: is it *imaginable*? And whether a vision is imaginable depends upon whether the integration point of that vision, indeed, the author of that vision, can make it happen. So, the question comes down to whether we can imagine a God who is not a passive observer of human affairs and history, but a passionate participant in those affairs and that history And if we can imagine that God could in fact be a God of history, then we would have to discern what it means for us to imagine that God. (pp.45/46)

At some stage here, Walsh takes over the argument:

Consequently, the question we must face in our political lives is whether we can *imagine* a politics of justice and compassion in place of the present politics of oppression and economic idolatry? Dare we *imagine* an economics of equality and care in place of the economics of affluence and poverty?...Can we *imagine* our work life to be at one with our worship – an act of service and praise, not a necessary evil on the way to an affluent lifestyle?...Is it imaginable that the mass media could be an agent of awakening social, cultural and spiritual renewal, rather than the one thing which numbs us into spiritual complacency and sleep more than anything else?... (p.46)

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Further thoughts

Brian Walsh, latterly joined by Brueggemann, make a compelling case for Christians to embrace an alternative worldview to that offered by the prevailing neo-liberal powers who claim, in principle, that the economists' view is the worldview; the health of the economy is all that matters; all good things flow from that. As Mrs Thatcher had it, 'The Good Samaritan couldn't have done his good work unless he had acquired the money to pay for it'. (Good point, Mrs.T, but this wasn't about the money; it was about human compassion).

But, in my view, it is necessary to look rather closer at the state of affairs on the ground than the case presented above manages to do. Walsh and Brueggemann write of 'the prophetic imagination'; imagining how things *might* be is indeed a vital first step but unless it is accompanied by some idea of how the imagined vision might be brought to reality, it is little more than a dream. But in order to propose convincing ways of remedying the situation which Walsh describes, one needs to know what stands in the way of the desired progress and this takes us right into the territory of *engaging the powers*. The main thrust of the present website project is that in order to engage the powers it is necessary to become reasonably well informed about what they actually do. The collection of papers comprising Part 1 of the present website provide a relatively undemanding read of key texts which survey the undesirable accomplishments of the powers since the end of World War II.

The collection is offered as an encouragement to explore the existing situation

The website project readily acknowledges, guided by Walter Wink, that the powers have been responsible for widespread and significant 'goods' in the last seventy years, but as Wink puts it, the powers need to be 'unmasked', for most of their oppressive and socially damaging projects have been carried out below the radar of easily accessible information through the media, for instance. Looking globally, our collection of papers in Part 1 address the establishing of the economic dominance of the US since 1944, the exploitive way the US-led powers (governments and business corporations) have negotiated with less well-developed nations, particularly through the structural

adjustment programmes forced on them by the IMF and World Bank in order to deal with their unpayable debts. Emerging nations have been desperate for foreign direct investment but when it came, it did not address their economic problems. One of our papers deals concisely with how that came about (Paper 4 Foreign Investment) Nearer home, Joseph Stiglitz demonstrates that a regime of unrelieved austerity is not an economic necessity; there is political wiggle-room for providing a less socially damaging regime (Paper 10 The Price of Inequality). William Keegan's paper argues that the austerity regime in the UK has been a cover for an ideological drive to reduce state spending, particularly on welfare, to an absolute minimum (Paper 11 Mr Osborne's Experiment). There is a set of papers on the environment and on global warming in particular. Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth* is a magnificent but controversial analysis of what is wrong and how it could be changed; it is an outstanding example of *informed* criticism (Papers 22-24). Jackson is a professor of economics so might be expected to provide an expert view; theologians and other Christians tackling the same problems can't expect to work at Jackson's level but his book, nevertheless, demonstrates the importance of being equipped with some measure of information and insight about the realities if one is to make a convincing case for the bright vision which Walsh and Brueggemann provide.

A persistent reader, at this stage, may well be wanting to say, 'Why don't you *tell us what to do?* Walsh didn't and you don't either'. My answer to this is, 'IT'S NOT THE RIGHT QUESTION'. Lesslie Newbigin in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Paper 12 in Part 2 of this website) offers this insight from Chapter 6 of John's Gospel:

The story begins with an act of pure compassion. A great crowd has gathered around Jesus, not because they believe in his teaching but because they have seen his healing (vv.1-2)...Jesus sees that they are hungry and - without any request from the crowd - he provides enough and more than enough to satisfy them (vv.3-13_ The result is a surge of popular enthusiasm to make Jesus their leader. A real 'peoples' movement' is about to be born (v.14). The response of Jesus is to distance himself completely from the movement. He will have nothing to do with it (v.15). The disciples, perplexed, set off for home. The crowd are determined to find him and eventually succeed (vv.16-25). Jesus tells them the real reason for their pursuit. They have been fed, but now they are hungry again. They should seek the food that gives not temporary but enduring life. When they (naturally) ask what work they should do to get this eminently desirable food, they are told that what is required is not a work but faith. They are to believe the One whom God has sent (vv.26-29). (p.225)

This story speaks for itself: faith comes before action.