

## ABOUT THE PAPERS

The collection of Papers which make up Part 1 of this project is an enlarged version of those I offered to churches in Reading in order to improve understanding of, and hopefully compassion towards, the exploited poor. It is worth noting that at the time I was doing this work, the attention of leading charities was focussed on world poverty particularly in the light of the oppressive structural adjustment programmes which the IMF and other international institutions were imposing on the people of the poorest countries of the world. Today, there is a greater focus on the plight of the poor in the UK, and with good reason. Like the earlier international initiatives, this too is no accidental development; it is the result of systematic exploitation by the rich and powerful, 'the powers' with which this project urges people to 'engage'.

Part 2 of the project, *Christians in the World*, consists of four sets of papers based on the work of four leading theologians who in quite different ways, cast doubt on the traditional view that 'Jesus didn't do politics' and thus the church should steer clear of this topic as well. There are certainly grounds for caution in this area, for sure; any view put forward by Christians that the church should follow a specific political programme at any time will rightly attract censure, for instance. Our four theologians represented here all make a persuasive case for responsible Christians enquiring into the activities of 'the powers', especially since those powers are perennially skilled at keeping their real motives out of the public view.

Part 3, *Beyond the Received Wisdom*, looks at Christian life as experienced by parish church members. I speak here from my personal experience and have a number of critical observations to make, beginning with the phenomenon, well documented amongst those who study such things, that institutions tend to accumulate a 'received wisdom', a kind of invisible line which employees cross at their peril and which limits behaviour, and what can be talked about and thought about within a clear though invisibly defined area. This greatly assists the smooth running of institutions both great and small, including parish churches, but it excludes the exploration of initiatives and ideas which lie beyond the permitted area. In the long term this is seriously detrimental and needs to be resisted.

Part 4, entitled *Lord, what shall we do?*, is centred on a remarkable book, *Subversive Christianity*, written by the Canadian theologian, Brian Walsh in 1992. It looks at the institutional problems of the church with a wider perspective than I offer in Part 3. Walsh's theology derives from Ephesians 6:12, a text which features prominently in Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers*.

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

If you attend seriously to the gospel, you find before you a 'worldview' which differs fundamentally from that of the secular world which surrounds us. How do we manage to live in both worlds at the same time? It seems a formidable and demanding task. Yet, according to Walsh - and my own observations confirm this - it appears to be quite straightforward and throws up no problems. There's something very odd about this. Walsh enlists the aid another theologian, Reginald Bibby, who concludes that there appears to be no problem because for the most part Canadian Christians are actually fully enrolled in the secular worldview without realising it.

If this is so, says Walsh, 'then we are faced, as a church (in Canada and the US and also in the UK) with a spiritual crisis of mammoth proportions'. The church, in his analysis, has become encultured by secularity with its incessant emphasis on the creation of wealth regardless of its detrimental effects on a large section of the population. What we need, says Walsh, is a prophetic vision like that of the Old Testament prophets. He turns to the work of Walter Brueggemann who 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'.

I conclude the Paper with some comments of my own. Rather severely I suggest: 'Walsh and Brueggmann write of 'a 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 is to be brought to reality, it is little more than a dream'. I continue: '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'.

In late 2016, when planning Part 5, *Towards a Different Future*, I began by asking myself, 'Well, what *does* stand in the way of the desired progress?' The most obvious single answer for us in the UK was the economic/political situation. When Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979, she introduced a new approach to economics; it was then called 'monetarism'. We now know it as an implementation of the proposals of the Hungarian philosopher, Friederich Hayek, under the name of neoliberalism. At the time, the new approach seemed to have many advantages, not least, breaking the back of union power and handing it to the wealth creators, giving them as free a hand as possible. Neo-liberal economic practice has been wearing thin for some time and by 2017 it could be said to have reached crisis point. However, the rallying call 'There Is No Alternative' still seemed to hold people in its power. The present government is relentless in promoting fears that any deviation to the current approach to the economy but that of the present government was, and still is, to risk economic catastrophe.

Well, they would say that, wouldn't they? In fact, there has been a growing exploration of possible alternative which do not involve a radical overthrowing of one economic system and replacing it by another system. Unsurprisingly, we hear very little about them. Accordingly, I decided to focus on some of these alternative views in Part 5, making it clear that there are alternatives to the dominant model which are not destructively revolutionary. I selected three books and following my usual procedure, I reduced each of them to about one-fifth of the original length, but retaining, I hope, the core ideas of the text, using the author's own words where possible and including some, but not all the supporting data.

My Epilogue to the website consists of passages from Rowan Williams' *The Truce of God*, and brings the reader to the heart of the matter. Walter Wink warns that the problems of challenging the powers are so multifaceted, so overwhelming, that we are inclined not to attempt the task. We should not be overwhelmed, says Wink, but must nevertheless remember that the task cannot be accomplished by human endeavour alone. It will be God's doing or it won't happen. For Rowan Williams that means that we must place ourselves beside Jesus and follow him as obedient disciples. This is a case where it can be truly said that There Is No Alternative.