

Engaging the Powers

PART 5. TOWARDS A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Foreword

by
Hamish Preston

Preamble

I must apologise for a rather lengthy preamble, but Part 5 is the culmination of the website project as a whole and it needs to be preceded by a drawing together of some of the strands in the earlier parts of the project. I begin by referring to Part 4 which leads directly into part 5.

Part 4 of *Engaging the Powers* is based on the inspiring work of the Canadian theologian, Brian Walsh, in his book *Subversive Christianity* (1992). We Christians, says Walsh, are trying to live in two opposing cultures at the same time; on the one hand we hear the traditional teaching of the Church centred as it is on the life and teaching of the Incarnate Lord and guaranteed by that Lord, crucified and risen. On the other hand, as Walsh saw it in 1992, we live as part of a Western cultural myth which proclaims that progress is inevitable if only we allow human reason scientifically to investigate our world so that we can acquire the technological power to control that world in order to realise ultimate human good. Given that premiss, how did and how do Christians cope with trying to live in two contradictory cultures at the same time? The verdict, according to another Canadian, Reginald Bibby, is unflattering, to say the least:

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

Says Walsh:

What Bibby says of Canada, I suspect is equally applicable throughout what was one called Christendom, certainly including the United States and the United Kingdom. If Bibby's analysis is right - if Christians...really do construct reality in pretty much the same terms as everyone else; if, in fact, they relate to immigrants, single mothers, the poor, the handicapped...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.

If all 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 p.28)

So what is to be done?

Walsh explores the situation:

(One)way to describe the nature of the diagnosis that we are working on here is that we are engaged in prophecy. Indeed, when culture is following idols, and the covenant community is asleep its enculturation, what we need is a prophetic vision. (p.36)

Walsh now turns to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann who says:

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evolve a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us...

He refers to Brueggemann again a little later:

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)

And then,

Consequently, the question we must face in our political lives is whether we can *imagine* a politics of justice and compassion in the 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 that numbs us into spiritual complacency and sleep more than anything else?

Taking the argument further

My own comment on Walsh's exposition was as follows:

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.

I then commended the series of papers making up Part 1 of *Engaging the Powers*. They were written between 2003 and 2015. Based on responsible relevant texts, these papers originally provided information for my colleagues in the Reading Churches Campaigning Network which aimed to encourage church communities to become actively involved over issues of economic injustice throughout the world. One might hope that many of the oppressive influences which are described in the papers would have been remedied by now. For instance, Jacques Gelinat's splendid *Juggernaut Politics*, written in 2003, provided a panoramic view of the setting up and continuance of the world dominating institutions of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. Sadly this volume is just as relevant today as it was when it was written despite the fact that both the IMF and the World Bank have considerably changed their positions since then. Two of the papers are perhaps of special interest today: those based on Joseph Stiglitz' *The Price of Inequality* (2012), and William Keegan's *Mr Osborne's Experiment* (2014). The theme of the first is that, contrary to what we are continually told, there is plenty of room within a responsibly conducted economy to take steps to diminish the increasing inequality of incomes in the US. The argument transposes easily to the UK. The second text argues that the previous Chancellor's insistence on the continuation of a regime of austerity in the UK is simply unnecessary and stems from a doctrinaire desire to reduce the contribution of the state to the national economy. Fairly key arguments a few years ago, but without being too sensational, I suggest they have become 'red hot' in the turbulent economic/political scene we have today in late July 2017.

I am happy to claim that the entire collection of papers in Part 1 of *Engaging the Powers* provides today a serviceable and reasonably comprehensive view of 'what the powers are really up to'. It will make a good starting point for anyone who resolves to take up an active interest in this demanding but rewarding topic.

I would add:

Only when we understand what is really going on, can we hope to engage with the realities of bringing about change. Benign innocence, a favourite position for church people, is inadequate. But, as I tried to make clear in Part 3, this is not a call for 'the general mobilisation of troops' in church communities. The matters we are dealing with are complicated and the relevant reading is necessarily demanding. Following the Pete Ward Papers in Part 3, *Liquid Church*, it seems to me to be necessary for churches to look for other opportunities for communication beyond the standard Sunday morning service, not as replacements but as alternative routes. In my present

church, for instance, small cards about *Engaging the Powers* are on display in the lobby, and about twice a year, I am permitted to stand up at the main service and draw attention to copies of a communication sheet about the project. This way, communication is established with the small number of people who are, or might be actively interested but without putting an undesirable pressure on everyone else. I neither seek nor get overt backing from the clergy at the weekly mainstream service. My Vicar is, in fact, wholeheartedly supportive but we are agreed about the best way of going that optional and unpressurised involvement is the best way of putting *Engaging the Powers* into circulation.

Some practical theology

I have just observed that the reading necessary for anyone who resolves to take up an active interest in the complex topic which *Engaging the Powers* addresses is demanding. I have also noted, elsewhere, that the reading is to be found in books by academics or responsible investigative journalists. But who reads books like this unless they are involved professionally or tackling a reading list for an academic qualification? A few, but not enough. The readership needs to become strong enough to signal to those in power that a significant number of citizens are well-enough informed to distinguish between what the politicians claim to be doing and what they actually do. At times, when the political arguments get lively, one can rely on the formal political opposition to confront government with the discrepancies. But this depends on the fluid conditions of current opinion. There are similar limitations to the vigilance of the broadcast and printed media. All such scrutiny is circumscribed by the topical issues of the day which emerge and fall back in short time frames. For a more sustained view of the misuse of power by those who rule us, we must turn to books where we learn about the historical background to current issues or to the ideologies which drive and limit the economic and political players of the day, that is to say, if we are to take the longer view and to *understand* what is going on rather than simply reacting to it.

I have suggested earlier in the project that becoming well-informed is as important as active conventional campaigning if one subscribes to the Christian commitment to help make the world a better place. In answer to the perennial cry, 'Lord, what shall we do?', I suggested that this is the wrong question. Following Brian Walsh, I said that:

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.

If we listen to Jeremiah, Ezekiel or to their modern counterparts we can come to understand collectively where we are going wrong at national or international level. We also come to understand how we ourselves personally have become entangled in the situation. We are ready to repent and to weep. When something like this happens, we don't need to be told what to do. The answers will become clear to us as individuals. It is at this stage, I suggest, that the strength of becoming well-informed will become apparent. It is not an alternative to active campaigning; it is a very desirable preliminary; once we begin to 'know the ropes' we will not need advice on how to proceed, the range of opportunities will become self-evident.

What I have been trying to reach here is a slightly idealised picture of the well-read activist committed to unmasking the systematic oppression of the poor and seeking more equitable ways of running national and international affairs. My activist will have the autonomy to withstand the clichés, the slogans, the sound bites and the simplifications of the political manipulators. In short, my activist will have found an effective way of engaging the powers. If my own experience is anything to go by, the more one learns about this, the more interesting it gets and the more committed one becomes.

One reaction to all this from some practising Christians will be to protest that they are being called on to try even harder, to do even more. This is a dead end. This enterprise is not about doing good works. It is centred on God. As one American Anglican has expressed it quite beautifully: 'To love God is to relieve the burden of all who suffer'. Coming to this state of understanding does not

fall out of the blue. It will come about through a continuing process of learning to approach God in prayer and worship. There is an important insight in current philosophy that there are different kinds of knowing. Dominant amongst the thinkers for several hundred years has been the notion that there is only one form of knowledge and it is that employed in the scientific world. This view has been increasingly challenged since the end of World War II. Amongst current perceptions is the idea of *knowledge by acquaintance*. It is pointed out that we come to know other people by a gradual process of 'getting to know' them. Scientific rationality has little to do with it. I single out this idea, because it seems to me that it's not only other people we come to know by acquaintance, but also God.

Part 5

Towards a Different Future

So, if we are to follow Brueggemann's prophetic imagination we need to look at what stands in the way of its fulfilment. There is so much, so where do we start?

From my own Part 1 papers it has become clear over the past few years that economic theory would be a good place to start. The events of the past year have intensified that instinct. The political events of the last year both in the US and the UK came about, it is widely agreed, through a sense of disenchantment with the ruling political elites in both countries. The UK version is that a continuing of the economic policy of austerity for ten year after the economic crisis has led to widespread hardship and distress but the politicians carry on regardless. As my William Keegan paper in Part 1 points out, there is reason to suppose that the politicians are driven not by economic necessity as they claim, but by a doctrinaire desire to shrink the state at all costs. If this is really the case, and Keegan is by no means the only commentator to think that it is, then the ideology of orthodox economics stands behind this deeply unsatisfactory development.

I have accordingly selected three challenging texts about economics for consideration in Part 5. The back cover of David Jenkins' *Market Whys and Human Wherefores* describes it bluntly as 'a demolition job', and so it is. What it demolishes is the ideology of Free Market economics which asserts that the 'success' of the market must come before all other considerations, political, social or human which governments need to pursue. This idea would not have had such material influence had not Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher become enamoured of it in the 1980s. As things stand, life in the US and the UK and to a lesser extent within the developed world as a whole has been dominated for the past near on thirty years by this powerful dogma. It is interesting, for instance, that in the UK when Labour succeeded the Conservatives in 1997, they understood that the price of gaining and retaining political power was to continue subscribing to the dictates of the Free Market. Since returning to power in 2010, the Conservatives have continually bolstered their position by pointing to the threat of economic disaster which would attend any incoming Labour government. Following the general election of July 2017 the magic of the Free Market has begun to fade, indeed it may be rapidly approaching disintegration, but David Jenkins' forensic dismemberment of the arguments upon which it is based make very interesting reading.

Anthony Atkinson is a very practical economist. He does not get embroiled in ideological discussion and in his *Inequality - What Can Be Done?* he confines himself to fifteen proposals which would significantly improve the disparity in income between the best and the worst paid in the UK, or indeed, elsewhere in the developed world. He does not offer his proposals as a collection to be accepted or rejected as a whole but he does lump them together for the purpose of costing and comes to the conclusion that, given various imponderables, they would work out somewhere around revenue neutral. Given that, and given the widespread social, economic and political benefits of Atkinson's proposals, one has to ask why none of them have featured in recent government proposals or, indeed, why some of them, like the proposal to offer national savings bonds, would simply be restoring active cuts by recent governments. The answer which most readily springs to mind is that it does not suit their real as opposed to their declared interests to do so. This may involve an adherence to Free Market ideology or it may be simply a matter of gaining

and retaining a hold on political power and the benefits of wealth. Either way, Atkinson's *Inequality* stands as a stinging rebuke to the elite which governs us today.

If Atkinson's *Inequality* offers some precise economic changes which would lead towards 'A Different Future', Tim Jackson in *Prosperity Without Growth* provides a vision, and a radical one at that, of what the 'different future' might look like, or, as he asserts, *must necessarily* look like. The imperative arises through the urgent necessity to deal effectively with the warming climate. But, says Jackson, this cannot be achieved whilst governments are wedded to economic growth as a top priority because the main engine of growth is consumption. Jackson acknowledges, in detailed argument, the reasons why economic growth is seen by economists as a precondition of a prosperous society; without it, the twin pressures of automation and the drive amongst businesses for 'labour efficiency' would lead to unacceptable unemployment. But this chosen route to prosperity runs directly counter to the need to consume less and dispense, in a relatively short period of time, with fossil fuels. As Jackson puts it at the head of his final chapter:

Society is faced with a profound dilemma. To resist growth is to risk economic and social collapse. To pursue it relentlessly is to endanger the ecosystem on which we depend for long-term survival.

Jackson's proposals for dealing with this formidable difficulty are far-reaching and insightful. They centre on the paramount demand to sustain full or near full employment. When one set of jobs disappears as they must do when the demand for growth at all costs is abandoned, alternatives must be found. These would centre, in Jackson's vision, on a massive relocation of investment towards energy-saving measures and on the growth of jobs in sectors which depend on quality human contact, such as caring for the elderly, such jobs being given higher status and better pay than they are at present.

Getting from where we are now in terms of general social attitudes to anywhere near what Jackson envisages is plainly a daunting task. How might changes like this be brought about? It can't be done by government diktat but, government still has a crucial role to play in undertaking a pattern of legislation which is at least compatible with the desired changes, says Jackson. The last two chapters dealing with this are amongst the most thought-provoking and hopeful in Jackson's account. Incidentally, he is not opposed to growth in principle, just to 'the belief that growth should trump all other policy goals'. Nevertheless, it is this central item which is the most spectacularly controversial amongst Jackson's proposals.

This is probably the right place to raise a general point about reading my papers. I have indicated the significance of becoming well-informed about 'what the powers are really up to'. But I have to emphasise that the kind of reading I have in mind doesn't make us into experts; the well-informed citizen will have the confidence and the knowledgeable background to examine critically the activities of governments and business leaders. But questions as far-reaching and as controversial as the demoting of continuous growth as the basis of economic prosperity are clearly a matter in which the opinions of experts is substantially involved. The well-informed outsider can't expect to follow all the technical argument, but if that argument is to translate into proposals for action by the politicians, the experts will have to find ways of making it generally intelligible. And it is at this stage that watchful critics of government thinking and proposed action come into play. They do so, of course, in the spirit of the splendid dictum by an eighteenth century Irish politician 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance'.