

INTRODUCING 'ENGAGING THE POWERS'

The title of the project is taken from an influential book by the American theologian, Walter Wink. Wink is deeply perturbed by the imperialistic and militaristic stance of his home country which he sees as quite incompatible with Christian ideals. He sets out in this and two companion volumes to demonstrate how far the government of the US has departed from God's will - much as the prophets of the Old Testament berated the rulers of ancient Israel and Judah. The 'powers that be' in the US, says Wink, claim to be acting in God's name but their actions and policies are more aligned to the barbaric beliefs of the ancient Babylonians. Might this impassioned *crie de cour* apply to other nation states besides the USA, one has to inquire.

My theme, of course, is yes it does here in the UK though in a slightly different form. My starting point, however, is very unspectacular. Some fifteen years ago, I was running a small project in my hometown of Reading, in which I distributed campaigning literature from organisations like Christian Aid, Tearfund and CAFOD, drawing attention to the plights of many underdeveloped countries, particularly those of sub-Saharan Africa, which were deeply indebted and were being forced by the international institutions, led by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to open up their markets to the emerging multinational corporations in return for forgiveness of some of their unrepeatable pile of debts. The detrimental effects of this policy for the inhabitants of the debtor nations led to claims of economic injustice and oppression by the charities concerned.

In an attempt to interest churches in Reading in this situation, I regularly distributed batches of campaigning literature from the charities which usually took the form of asking individuals to sign and send off postcards to relevant government ministries and other institutions. Each of the churches which joined this scheme provided an 'advocate' who distributed the literature and hopefully explained, referring to the literature provided by the charity concerned, why it was necessary. This seemed to work well, but when I also attempted to gain the attention of our advocates in a series of papers I wrote drawing attention to the background of what was actually going on, interest was virtually non-existent. At this time, I also came across a quotation of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to the effect that 'Christians are very good at fishing the bodies out of the water, but not so good at finding out how they got there in the first place'. Well, the archbishop certainly didn't have the churches in Reading in mind when he made this comment. It looked as though the problem I had encountered might be much more widespread.

At the risk of being accused of reaching broad general conclusions on insufficient evidence, I nevertheless generalised this situation by proposing that churches, at least those in the Church of England in our part of the country, appear to lack curiosity in the activities of 'the powers' which are so often seriously detrimental to a healthy society. If they lack curiosity, then they also lack knowledge and without knowledge of what is really going on they are in no position to offer informed criticism of the world as we find it. This appears to be a serious gap in the way the church relates to the world at large. The present project is designed to encourage a change of attitude in this respect.

It may well be objected that bishops and other senior church people frequently make critical comment about the social and economic shortcomings that we see about us. They do indeed, but there is no apparent means by which their insights might percolate down to parish level. This is seriously problematic because the obvious way of attempting a remedy, that into say, providing a stream of information sheets, unmediated by an advocate after the Reading model, would be not only ineffective but would seriously threaten the wellbeing of many, perhaps most parishioners, who lack the intellectual confidence to delve into these murky waters. I examine this problem in the course of the project.

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