

*The Twenty-fifth*

**ERIC SYMES ABBOTT**

**Memorial Lecture**

**THE END OF THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY?**  
Towards a Christian understanding of the common good

delivered by

***The Rt Revd the Lord Harries of Pentregarth FKC***

Former Bishop of Oxford,  
Gresham Professor of Divinity,  
and Honorary Professor of Theology at  
King's College London

***at Westminster Abbey***

on Thursday 6 May 2010

and

***at Keble College, Oxford***

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**Dean Eric Symes Abbott  
(1906 – 1983)**

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Tel: 020 7848 2333  
Fax: 020 7848 2344  
Email: dean@kcl.ac.uk

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## *THE END OF THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY?* *Towards a Christian understanding of the common good*

### **The origins of the permissive society**

In 1983 I walked round from King's College in the Strand to attend Eric Abbott's memorial service in Westminster Abbey. I walked with the relatively new Principal of the College, Sir Neil (later Lord) Cameron, a former Chief of the Defence Staff. As we went in through the great West doors the Abbey was crammed full. "What had this man got?" he asked me in his characteristically direct way, and I quickly tried to explain to him that it was not the books Eric Abbott had written, or the distinguished positions he had held, but his personal influence on individuals; his friendships, his wise counsel, his spiritual guidance person to person.

Eric Abbott was Dean of King's College London from 1945 to 1955, and Warden of Keble College, Oxford, from 1956 to 1960. Then he was Dean of Westminster Abbey until he retired in 1974. Those last ten years of his ministry, the 1960s, saw extraordinary changes in our society, the effects of which are still very much with us. Philip Larkin put it in an unforgettable verse:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty three  
(which was rather late for me)  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
and the Beatles' first LP.

Larkin called that poem "Annus Mirabilis".

It was a heady time which those who did not live through might now have difficulty in imagining, so strong was the contrast with the way of life taken for granted by those who grew up in the 1940s and 50s. Indeed so heady was it, that it is said that those who can remember the 1960s weren't really there. Carnaby Street and daring new fashions, and sex of course, with the first widespread use of the pill. "Sexual intercourse began / in nineteen sixty three", as those like Philip Larkin who had grown up in an earlier era reflected rather ruefully. Not only the Beatles but Mick Jagger with the Rolling Stones – and drugs.

It is not surprising either that this period should quickly have been labelled the permissive society.

Yet other periods have been characterised by libertinism – the Restoration at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Berlin in the 1920s, and so on. But what distinguishes the 1960s from these eras is first, that it was not just an elite, whether aristocratic or cultural, who acted as though free of all constraints, but it was an outlook which quickly permeated the whole of society. Secondly, the change was not just about social and sexual mores, it concerned very fundamental legislative changes. "Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / and the Beatles' first LP." But the end of that kind of censorship was only one and not the most significant of the legal changes that came about in that period. More significant was the Wolfenden report with its recommendation, which passed into law, that consenting homosexual acts in private should no longer be a criminal offence. Hardly less important was the 1967 Abortion Act which allowed abortion under certain circumstances. The original supporters of the Act, put forward by

David Steel, a Christian and supported by many Christian leaders, was to stop backstreet abortions as a result of which more than forty women a year were dying. They did not envisage that the criteria would now be interpreted in such a way that it seems possible for someone to obtain an abortion almost on demand. Some will approve of that, others disapprove, but the point here is that we now live in a society in which in reality it is a matter of individual choice, not what the legislators originally thought was right for society as a whole.

Those who have grown up since 1970 perhaps take all this for granted, and find it difficult to imagine another world. But there was another aspect of the 1960s which we certainly cannot take for granted. It was a time of extraordinary idealism. Where I was serving as a curate there were literally hundreds of young people who formed a social network in order to offer help to people in need in the neighbourhood particularly old people. VSO, Voluntary Service Overseas, was founded, helping many young people serve overseas for a period.

Political change was in the air. The Government of Harold Wilson, from 1964 to 1970, began with the image of one hundred days of white heat technology. Much was meant to happen even in its first phase.

Yet that was mild compared with what was being put forward elsewhere. Paul Johnson now has a reputation as a right wing commentator. I remember a young flame-haired Johnson arriving at our church hall in order to speak at a meeting in favour of the cultural revolution going on in China. Christians engaged in serious dialogue with Marxists and found

many things in common. One of my jobs at the time was Chaplain to Westfield College in the University of London. In 1968 our Professor of Maths went off to Paris to help man the barricades.

By the mid 1970s all that had gone and we began the era of “Greed is good”.

### **To each their own good**

I am making no judgement about whether in the words of *1066 and All That*, what happened in the 1960s was a good thing or a bad thing. You can tot up the balance sheet yourself. I simply want to focus on one aspect of the changes that took place at that time, the emphasis on free choice, on people deciding for themselves how they were going to live their lives – the permissive element in the title.

This permissiveness went right across the board, into aesthetics as well as morality. It became quite widely accepted that it was not possible to say that certain works of art were better than others, that there was a high culture and a low, populist one. Popular music began to reflect some of the prestige that had previously belonged to classical music, the general assumption being, to everyone their own taste, with none being more worthy of esteem than others. But in particular the concept of virtue, of goodness as a noble ideal for the community as a whole, whether one was a religious believer or not, finally faded from view. Its disappearance apparently began some time before. Rose Macaulay has a wonderful, breathless passage in one of her novels where she wrote:

Once people used to talk about being good and being bad,

they wrote about it in letters to their friends, and conversed about it freely; the Greeks did this, and the Romans, and then, after life took a Christian turn, people did it more than ever ... they went on like this through most of the nineteenth century, even when they were not evangelicals or tractarians or anything like that, ... and the Victorian agnostics wrote to one another about it continually, it was one of their favourite topics, for the weaker they got on religion the stronger they got on morals, which used to be the case more than now.

She continues,

I am not sure when all this died out, but it has now become very dead. I do not remember when I was at Cambridge we talked about such things ... though we talked about everything else, such as religion, love, people, psychoanalysis, books, art, places, cooking, cars, food, sex and all that. And still we talk about all these other things, but not about being good or bad.<sup>1</sup>

But whatever we think or talk about, as T S Eliot once put it:

The world turns and the world changes,  
But one thing does not change.  
In all of my years, one thing does not change.  
However you disguise it, this thing does not change,  
The perpetual struggle of good and evil.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder what Eliot would say now. The idea of good and evil carries with it the connotation that we have to choose and that we can be tempted to do what we know to be wrong. But in the Wikipedia definition of temptation there is absolutely no mention of words like good or evil, or even the word bad. Instead it refers to what it calls “negative connotations.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rose Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond*, (London: Collins, 1956), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> T S Eliot, ‘Choruses from “The Rock”: I’, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S.Eliot*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 148.

You could rather have fun with the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. After forty days Jesus was desperately hungry and thought of turning some stones into bread, but this had rather negative connotations for him.

### **Signs of shift in the tectonic plates of our underlying philosophy?**

All this said, there are now some signs that the tectonic plates of this philosophy underlying our society are beginning to shift. One sign was the 2009 Reith Lectures by Michael Sandel, whose philosophy lectures at Harvard draw a thousand students at a time. In a series of vivid telling examples Sandel shows that we cannot avoid questions about the nature of the good. We cannot rest content with an unqualified economic liberalism for example, as was shown by what happened in New Orleans in 2005. At the time of the terrible flooding a few people exploited the market and sold basic goods at many times the normal price. This was greeted with anger in much of the United States. But of course according to a theory of economic liberalism there is nothing wrong with this. The people needed food and water, and there were those there prepared to sell it to them – at a price the buyers were prepared to pay. If we think this is disgusting, it is because we are moved by factors other than liberalism. We think a society ought to be characterised by notions of honour, or what is decent. Another example of Sandel’s is even more telling.

In Germany in 2001 a man advertised for someone willing to be cooked and eaten. Two hundred people enquired, four were interviewed, and one was duly chosen, cooked and eaten. The German authorities found that the man could not be charged with murder, though he was eventually tried and

imprisoned under another category. Sandel points out that the action could not have been more consensual – but that society cannot exist on the basis of that value of such free consent alone.

In a range of such examples Sandel shows that neither economic liberalism nor social liberalism is enough. We need to find other values, in addition to respect for free choice, for society to function as, in our better moments we want it to. So why have we been reluctant to admit to this for the last fifty years? The first reason is that we all have such different ideas of the good, it would seem impossible for society as a whole to agree on any common notions. Secondly, we fear, and those in the United States particularly fear, that if there was a societal notion of the good, it would be one dominated by right wing moralists. But as he pertinently remarks, “Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread”.

Liberals are the ones who stress the notion of to each their own good, indeed it has come to be seen as one of the defining characteristics of a liberal. But Sandel rightly points out that if they do not engage in the debate about a common good the ground will be occupied by others. One sign of hope was the election of Barack Obama. Obama is a liberal, but he did not take the view that his morality and his Christian religion should be confined to private life. On the contrary he took them onto the campaign trail. He wanted his Christian understanding of the common good to be debated in the public sphere and the policies that sprang from it to be enacted.

Michael Sandel’s lectures and book<sup>3</sup> are one sign that there might be the beginning of a change in our public philosophy. Another might be the work of the Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen. Closer to home there is the attempt led by Madeleine Bunting to foster what she calls “Citizen ethics.” It is a good phrase. It is not moralistic, and it focuses on how we ought to think and act in relation to the public realm, the obligations we ought to be aware of simply by virtue of the fact that we belong to and are, along with others, dependent on membership of the *civis*, our organised life together.

### **Law and morality**

This raises the whole issue of morality. Sadly, what bedevils this whole subject is a narrow stereotypical understanding of morality and a very narrow, pragmatic view of law. I had a sad experience of the former when some years ago I helped mount a conference at Cumberland Lodge on morality and soap operas. I was fortunate in being able to attract some distinguished writers and producers, but failed to get across the message that morality was not primarily about who was having or not having sex. What I wanted people to reflect on were the fundamental assumptions and presuppositions behind the story lines. For, whether we are aware of it or not, these will carry a moral vision. In fact the moral vision expressed in some soap operas does have some strong elements, such as tolerance. It is not a question of thinking about morality in order to judge others, but in order to be clear about what we are doing. This very much needs to be stressed in order to take on board the fact that morality, or a moral vision, is fundamental to law in all its aspects.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).



In the international sphere, for example, the idea of human rights is first of all a moral concept.<sup>4</sup> It can and does and should wherever possible take legal form, but still the moral imperative is prior. It is this which enables human rights legislation to be scrutinized and improved. It is this which enables us to judge certain actions as violations of human rights, even though there may be no law in place.

The importance of this moral dimension was brought dramatically to the fore in the recent exposure of expenses being claimed by Members of Parliament. There are a number of elements to this.

First, we have to go back to the origin of the problem. This was the failure of governments, of different political complexions, to raise the pay of Members of Parliament to something roughly equivalent to what many of them might expect to earn outside. This failure was of course because they feared that we, the public, would not stand it. By many standards of course MPs are very well paid, but the fact is that in a competitive market they could earn more outside. So there was a failure by government and the public to face up to realities.

Secondly, as a result of this, it appears to have been implied that generous expenses would be allowable for second homes and the expenses associated with them. So the result of a failure to face reality resulted in a subterfuge that lent itself to dishonesty.

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<sup>4</sup> As Amartya Sen rightly argues in *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

Thirdly, the office charged with administering expenses, under the Speaker, seems to have told people they can claim for more or less what they want. This, again, is a disgraceful abuse of a system that is in stark contrast to the kind of scrutiny that the Inland Revenue would expect to bring to bear.

Fourthly, within this overall climate it appears that some claims were downright illegal.

Fifthly, within the total spectrum of revelations there is a clear distinction to be made between those who acted in a criminal manner, those who stayed within the letter of the law but who by any ordinary reckoning were grossly dishonest, those who pushed the limits of what was thought to be legal beyond what most ordinary people would regard as justified, and those whose expense claims were modest and entirely justified. What happened of course was that they all, as it were, put up their hands, and said, "Yes, we know the system is wrong, and we must change it", but this corporate putting-up of hands has blurred the fact that there were those huge differences in behaviour that I have just outlined. Whilst it is true that some MPs have resigned or said that they were not going to stand at this election or have agreed to pay back some money (is that good enough?), there has been some blurring of individual responsibility, with the general smearing of Parliament as a whole. The prophet Ezekiel warned humanity more than 2,500 years ago that we are individually responsible, and we cannot hide ourselves behind an appeal to corporate responsibility. Furthermore, this general smearing of MPs is highly

detrimental to our national life. A respected and effective Parliament is crucial to our society, and the fact that Members of Parliament are held in low esteem by the general public is unhealthy.

Sixthly, this scandal reveals a moral climate in which people are guided only by what they think is legal, with what is legal being pushed as far as it can, without any thought as to whether it is also honest. For whilst the legal is underpinned by the ethical, what is ethical goes far wider and deeper. The defence of MPs time and again was that they had done nothing illegal. Perhaps they hadn't; but what they had done certainly seemed morally unjustified to most of the rest of the population. In this respect the moral climate of Parliament is no different from that of the rest of society. It is more like a mirror in which we see society as a whole reflected. For in recent decades so much of society has been characterized by such an attitude, with the only question being asked as to whether something is within the law.

There are now some signs of a reaction against this. As far as the market economy is concerned, for example, its most thoughtful advocates have always argued that it depends on a moral foundation for its success. This has recently been reiterated for example by the Reith Lecturer, Professor Sandel, by the banker Stephen Green (who is also a Church of England priest) in his recent book, and by the Pope in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*,<sup>5</sup> who argue that the market must be seen in a wider moral and

indeed theological framework. In the field of financial regulation, the best companies have always taken the view that the law is not enough, but the ethos, or moral milieu in which people work is even more important. It is not just a question of what is permissible but what is honourable. Indeed where has the whole concept of honour gone in our society? And honour does not exist in isolation, it is part of and arises out of a community characterized by values which everyone is expected to uphold.

What this analysis reveals is that a moral dimension goes through every aspect of life. But in particular it shows that what is legal is not enough. There is a moral law as well as human legislation. In many other spheres also it has been realized that the letter of the law is not enough. What this also brings out is that institutions were once and can be again amongst the major carriers of values in our society, the professional associations, the best companies, universities and schools. They have a major challenge, because they are operating in a moral climate that believes keeping within the law is all that matters. Good laws express a moral vision, but they do not contain it. The moral vision goes wider and deeper and, for a Christian is ultimately grounded in the wisdom of God.

### **The kind of society we want**

This again takes us back to the kind of choices we make. The hugely influential modern philosopher Alastair MacIntyre argued that we do not make our choices in a vacuum, but as part of a moral tradition. We are born and shaped by a moral tradition, and until we opt for another one, we make our choices within the parameters it provides. This moral tradition will be inseparable from a particular understanding of what it means to be

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Green, *Good Value: Reflections on Money, Morality, and an Uncertain World*, (London: Allen Lane, 2009); Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Rome, 2009).

a human being. Or to put it another way, we find ourselves part of a communal story, a story which has a particular understanding of the goal and purpose of human life. The choices we make when young are shaped by the tradition we have been brought up in. So our freedom is not a naked one, shorn of all that is distinctive about me as a citizen of a particular country and religion at a particular time, it is a choice to be made within that continuum. We are not only embodied as individuals, we are embodied in communities, and these help to give us our identity. So for Christians our choices are made within the body of Christ, within the community of Christians, shaped by the past and looking to the future, including a future beyond space and time.

Against the background of these considerations, what kind of society should a Christian desire? Of course there will be always be disagreements about the nature of that good, but as Michael Sandel emphasized, we have to work at it. And this means raising very fundamental Aristotelian questions about purpose. For how can a university, for example, decide what it should value or honour unless it has first some understanding of what it is that a university exists for? The question is even more pertinent in relation to society as a whole. What is honourable or decent or good in a society depends on our vision of what a society is and what it is for.

T S Eliot described the society he wanted in these words:

It would be a society in which the natural end of man – virtue and well-being in community – is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end – beatitude – for those who

have the eyes to see it.<sup>6</sup>

This is a very appealing description which I could certainly live with. Nevertheless, I think it needs to be put somewhat differently today. First, the phrase “virtue and well-being” does not reflect the emphasis on growth and development which we now regard as desirable. Secondly, the word “virtue” has for many people too moralistic a tone to it, as well as being focused on morality, whereas in the modern world we are concerned with the development of the whole person, body, mind and spirit as a unity. So instead of “virtue and well-being” I would prefer “the development of gifts and character”. Then, thirdly, the phrase “in community”, though welcome, does not quite do justice to the essentially bipolar nature of person and community. It is not just that persons live in community, without human community there could be no persons. Furthermore communities, like persons, have qualities and character and are open to change and development. They need to be seen together. So although I cannot devise as felicitous a sentence as Eliot, the first half of my understanding of a desirable society would be:

It would be a society in which the natural end of human beings – personal and communal development of gifts and character – is acknowledged for all.

What about the last half of Eliot’s statement, “the supernatural end – beatitude – for those who have eyes to see it”? A sentiment which was very dear to Eric Abbott as it was to Eliot. The contrast between the two halves of the sentence, between what is acknowledged for all and what is there for those with eyes to see it, is one with which I am in sympathy. It

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<sup>6</sup> T S Eliot, *The idea of a Christian Society*, (London: Faber, 1982), p.62.

reflects the conviction of traditional natural law theory, that there are morally desirable states and qualities which all can see and to which all are called to respond, whether someone is a religious believer or not. We can see the force of this by thinking about any good school we know. Such a school will seek to have an ethos in which there is mutual respect, a concern for others both within the school and outside. It will be inclusive in the sense that it will want every pupil to develop their particular potential and talents. All schools will have some such ideal, however they might be failing at any one moment, and whether or not they are faith schools. Furthermore parents who send children to schools will want the school to have some such ideal. In short this is a natural ideal, whether it is for a school or society as a whole.

Furthermore, in Eliot's formula, the religious dimension is in no way imposed. It is simply there, as part of the history and culture for those with eyes to see it. Nevertheless, the world "beatitude" needs a little unpacking. It could just convey the idea of an individual soul's relationship with God. In fact, as the collect for All Saints' Day puts it, we are "knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body" of Christ. We come before God, now and in eternity, as members of the body of Christ. This body, like earthly human communities, is open to growth and development, not just of gifts and character, but in the knowledge and love of God. Or to put it another way, we have been made in the image of God, but are called, within the mystical body, to grow into the divine likeness. This is what is meant by "beatitude".

Like Aristotle Christians begin not with the question about what is right,

but what is the good. For us, God is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. The end or goal of human life is to grow into that likeness, not as solitary individuals, but with the mystical body of Christ. Whilst we are on this earth, there is a counterpart to this in our human communities of all kinds, including both civil society and the body politic. As I formulated it above:

It would be a society in which the natural end of human beings – personal and communal development of gifts and character – is acknowledged for all.

This is an understanding of the common good which I believe we should try build into and shape our life together, whether it is at a local, national or international level. It is in and through the process of doing this that we find our individual identity.

None of this should be taken as undermining a proper respect for individual choice. That is, rightly, one of the prime values of Western Society. But it is not the only value. My view is that nothing in life, and certainly not society and its institutions, is value-free or morally neutral. Every society reflects certain values, which in most cases will be rooted in the founding religion of that society. Within our society respect for individual choice is part of our vision of the good society. But it is not the only value. My view stands in contrast to one which suggests that there can be no agreed notion of a good society, and therefore everyone must be left free to choose their own values. On the contrary, there is such a thing as a good society, and if we understandably disagree about some of the details of this, there are areas on which we can agree and others which we can work at together. Within this overall good individual choice has a

proper and respected place as part of a wider set of values.

### **The Common Good in Catholic Teaching**

Although the Roman Catholic Church has had its reputation badly damaged in recent years as a result of the terrible behaviour of some of its priests and the cover up of these crimes by some members of the hierarchy, it is important not to forget the important social teaching of the Church. In this teaching the concept of the Common Good plays a key role. It was, for example, summed up in the excellent document on the Common Good produced by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in 1966. There they emphasise, for example, that the concept of the common good should not be understood in corporist terms as antithetical to individual rights and responsibilities. These are part of the common good and to name the common good is simply to focus on the public context in which these are to be balanced and adjudicated.

Most importantly the concept of the Common Good stands in firm opposition to the limited good of a ruling group or any class or sectional interest. As an implication of this it means that it stands for an inclusive view of society, one in which those least able to make their own way in it are included. This means more than ensuring an absence of absolute poverty. It means working at a society in which everyone can participate and flourish, in which there are no marginalized and there is no underclass. The document also suggests that where there is gross inequality this undermines the attempt to create a good society, and we have to note that since 1966 that gap between rich and poor in this country and in the world as a whole has widened considerably.

The document rightly says “Public authorities have the common good as their prime responsibility.” And this leads on to the concept of public service.

### **The concept of public service**

The eminent left wing historian Tony Judt has written recently, in words which would be echoed by many Christians, “Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today”.<sup>7</sup> What is striking about what he writes is its tone of sober realism and willingness to admit the failures of previous left wing approaches. His first priority now is a very limited one, to remind the present generation of the achievements of social democracy, and to conserve the best of them. He does not think there is now any grand left wing narrative that can convince a wider public.

Tony Judt singles out what he describes as the worship of the private sector as the great evil of the last twenty years, which has in his view undermined the State’s proper responsibility for providing shared goods and services. I am not qualified to speak on the respective merits of private or public provision of goods and services in so far as it means looking at efficiency, cost and so on. What I can say though is that not all public goods have to be delivered directly by the state, and that even when they are sub-contracted to either a profit or not-for-profit organisation, the state can and should continue to assume responsibility, which it can of course do by setting targets, inspections and the ability to award the contract to others. Furthermore it does not seem that even Tony Judt

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<sup>7</sup> An article in *The Guardian* of 20<sup>th</sup> March 2010 based on his book *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents*, (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

wants a system in which the state delivers everything. However, and this is the point that interests me, he relates our present malaise with what he calls the demise of a “public service mission” as a result of an excessive faith in the value of privatisation. Few in Britain now believe in what was once thought of as a “public service mission”: the duty to provide certain sorts of good and services just because they are in the public interest.

It is the implications of this link between rampant privatisation and the loss of a public service mission interpreted widely that I want to explore. In short I believe the problem lies in deeper historical roots that Tony Judt suggests.

Not long after I became Bishop of Oxford, I visited one of our best known independent schools, and I said to the wonderful headmaster, “You used to produce so many ordinands for the Church of England in the past. Now we have hardly any from you”. “Ah, Richard”, he said, “The whole concept of service has gone”. That was in 1987. It had already gone then.

The motto of The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, is “Serve to lead”. What is interesting about this of course is the assumption that those who come out of Sandhurst will be leaders and others will be the led. This was the assumption that governed life in this country for many centuries. There were the leaders and there were the led, with a little, but not very much, social mobility between the two categories. The idealistic note in the motto is that the only true basis for such leadership is a sense of service to those who are led. Our imperialism was driven by all kinds of material motives, but those who served the empire in an official capacity, as they

put it, were taught to have a sense of service to the empire and its peoples. The same ethic was present in the civil service and other forms of what were well described as “public service”. But the same spirit animated many people from well connected families who became nurses or missionary doctors.

Now it is possible to give a Marxist analysis of this. The sense of service is there simply to ameliorate the harsher aspects of class rule, and it must not stand in the way of revealing the class struggle for what it is and advancing towards a truly Socialist society. And you do not have to be a paid up Marxist to see the truth in this. One of Nadine Gordimer’s best novels is called *July’s People* (London: Cape, 1981). July is the houseboy of a decent liberal white family in Johannesburg. When the forces of liberation take the city, July rescues “his people” and takes them with him to his homeland. There an interesting question arises. Who should keep the keys of the family car in which they have fled? Indeed to whom does the car now belong? The family now find themselves totally powerless before the houseboy over whom until recently they had total power.

So it is clearly important to see the truth in a Marxist analysis, for the alternative is self-righteous illusion. But having seen the truth it does not mean that the concept of service goes out of the window. For the fact is that life is more complex than a strict Marxism allows. As we now know so well, a Socialist society does not prevent the development of categories of the leaders and the led, with sometimes enormous privileges attaching to the leaders. *The New Class* was the title of one well-known book at the time of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. The fact is that in any

society there will be those who for a variety of factors will be in a position of power over others, above all the power of money of course, but there are other forms of power that those who have money like to exercise through politics, the media, and influence generally. If this is an inescapable facet of human existence then the concept of service, whose seed is in all of us, is essential if life is not to be even more a question of 'dog eats dog' than it is at present.

Those who went into the civil service and other forms of public service did of course have mixed motives, as we all do for everything we do. But amongst those motives was very often a genuine sense of public service. It was inculcated in them by the schools that they had attended, many of these having been founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of knocking some civilised and Christian values into the rough sons of the newly prosperous beneficiaries of imperialism.

More widely the sense of public service inculcated in those schools encouraged people to go into what we call the caring professions as nurses and doctors, or the under-paid work of teaching. We miss the complexity of life and the ambiguity of all human striving unless we recognise the element of genuine idealism here.

That idealism was there right through until the end of the 1950s. Then, as I explored at the beginning, there were major changes. One aspect of this is that the concept of service found a number of new outlets. More people became social workers or worked for aid organisations. For as mentioned earlier, the 1960s were not just about people letting go and enjoying

themselves, there was a great deal of idealism around.

At the same time, with the decline in Christian influence, and the rise of a rights based agenda, the whole concept of service began to slide into the background. It was there as social and moral capital but it was not being replenished. The ideal now was not that of some people in power serving others but of much greater mutuality, and in so far as inequalities made true mutuality impossible, then this meant the assertion of rights, of protest and campaigns to achieve it.

The next development, of course, was what happened under Reagan and Thatcher and the notorious slogan, "Greed is good". And together with this there was the dismantling of direct state provision and its handing over to the private sector. This meant the demise of traditional conservatism. As Anthony Giddens put it:

Individualism and choice are supposed to stop abruptly at the boundaries of the family and national identity, where tradition must stand intact. But nothing is more dissolving of tradition than the "permanent revolution" of market forces.<sup>8</sup>

These developments, taken together, have led to the demise of the concept of public service and the concept of service more generally in our society. In fact there are still millions of volunteers, where the concept of service is alive and well, but elsewhere, where it used to have a place, it is not so much in evidence.

This short historical analysis reveals, I think, that this demise cannot

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 15.

simply be attributed to the illusion that the private sector will solve all problems. Its historical roots are deeper, and it concerns our whole understanding of what it is to be a human being, not just *homo politicus*. In short, even if we went back to direct state provision for much more of our public goods and services, the problem would remain – how to animate those who deliver them with a sense of service? The old Soviet system could not guarantee it, nor could any revival of old style social democracy in itself. What is needed is a shift in the culture of our society, which would be reflected not just in those directly employed by the state, but in those working for private companies carrying out state contracts and more widely in every aspect of our communal life.

Although the concept of service, as I have indicated, has historically in the West been bound up with both imperialism and class, as Christians we need to remind ourselves that it originates with Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples and taught that we are to serve one another as he came to serve us (John 13, 14).

It is a mistake to associate the concept of service only with the voluntary sector or the caring professions. When I used to give lectures to people in business, I used to enjoy quoting the motto of Dayton Hudson, a major American retailing firm:

The business of business is serving society, not just making money. Profit is our reward for serving society well. Indeed profit is the means and measure of our service – not an end in itself.

The business audience were usually startled at this and resisted it. But it is

obvious if you think about it. The key to success in business must be satisfied customers, and that means thinking about them and how they can best be served.

One of the achievements of the Reformation was Martin Luther's concept of the lay vocation. In contrast to the medieval view that there were two classes of Christians, top class ones who became ordained or a member of a religious order, who did not marry or have children, and those who bumped along at the bottom, married with a family in a secular job, Luther said that any secular job that met a need in society was potentially a vocation for a Christian. That is still true, and the Christian church still has an important role to play in helping people see their career in terms of service to society, not just a way of advancing themselves.

None of what I have said should be taken as in any way denying that people should stand up for themselves, and if their rights are being denied, struggle to achieve those rights. The concept of service and working for greater equality and mutuality between human beings are not mutually exclusive. But if our society is not just to be an arena in which various forms of self-interest fight to the death, then a retrieval and renewal of the concept of service is, I think, essential for its health.

This recovery is, I think, needed right across the board. Is it really good that some of our best and brightest desire only to become corporate lawyers or merchant bankers? Having stressed the importance of Luther's view that any job which society needs can be a genuine Christian vocation, clearly I must not rule out the idea that becoming a merchant banker or



corporate lawyer may indeed be what Christ is calling on some people to do. But whether it is the civil service, business, or politics, a sense of service needs to be recovered. Take politics for example. Harold Wilson famously remarked that the Labour party owed more to Methodism than it did to Marx. Most people who went into it were driven by a strong sense of wanting to make society a better place for the most marginal. Amongst Conservatives there was often a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*. I love the remark of the mother of Sir Alec Douglas Hume: “I think it is so good of Alec to *do* Prime Minister”.

It is of course false to romanticise the past, and we cannot simply repeat what was present then under our very different circumstances and with a rather different social base. But it is disastrous if the general public are convinced that all politicians are simply in it to pursue their own interests. A new moral *milieu*, a different spiritual environment, in which the old concept of public service takes on new meaning and is seen to be a reality, is badly needed.

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