

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Theological models for churches community involvement

Theological positions

1. Evangelical

Evangelical community involvement finds its roots in the Evangelical revival of the 18th-century and particularly in Victorian Evangelical social activism typified by the example of Lord Shaftesbury, Dr Barnardo and the Salvation Army amongst others. The 20th-century story is of declining Evangelical social activism in reaction to the Liberal social gospel but in recent years there has been a renewed interest. This has led to the main theological emphasis being on the unity of evangelism and social action which are often talked about as the two blades of a pair of scissors.

Youth and children's work tends to be a dominant theme in Evangelical community involvement, a good example of this would be the Homerton Youth Project some of whose work was described in the book *Youth in the City* by Pete Stow. The Frontier Youth Trust arose out of this Evangelical concern for youth work and has been an important organisation in developing a more radical (see below) dimension to Evangelical social thinking.

Theologically evangelicals are keen to root their social activism in the Bible. The more conservative wing will tend to go to traditional passages like the good Samaritan whilst the more radical end might look to Jesus' sermon in Nazareth where he proclaimed good news to the poor

2. Catholic

Catholic social teaching which informs both Roman and Anglo-Catholic activism finds its roots back in the fathers of the church and the pronouncements of figures like St John Chrysostom and his denunciation of the rich and command to give to the poor. This tradition has continued until this day in the special concern of Catholic community involvement with the homeless, marginalised and destitute. This concern often goes hand-in-hand with a criticism of modern industrial society which on the right is rooted in a desire to return to the values of medieval Europe and on the left tends towards Christian socialism (see below).

A good example of this concern for the marginalised and homeless is the work at Our Lady of Good Counsel Stoke Newington with Hackney Winter Night Shelter, North London Action for the Homeless Etc.. The Settlements of East London often had a Catholic basis although these have now become largely secular institutions. The work of Sisters and Friars retains its spiritual emphasis and is a quietly important presence in many places e.g. Dunloe Centre at Saviour's Priory or the Little Sisters of Jesus in Fellows Court.

Theologically Catholics often have a sacramental understanding of the world and this informs much of their thinking. The right might look to papal encyclicals whilst the left are more likely to look to the works of liberation theologians such as Gutierrez, Boff or Balasuriya.

3. Liberal

Liberal social activism finds its roots in the partnership between the Victorian Liberal party and the burgeoning nonconformist churches of that time, this came to its climax in the nonconformist conscience of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. It developed importantly in the social gospel of people like Walter Rauschenbusch and then in the subsequent reaction to its over optimistic belief in the coming of the kingdom of God through human agency by figures like Barth, Niebuhr and, most importantly, Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's concern for religionless Christianity has been a key factor in downplaying the institutional church in Liberal thinking and emphasising working for the kingdom of God outside the walls of the church.

Liberal thinking can be most clearly seen in the Methodist and United Reformed Churches -- especially in the URC Church Related Community Workers. Industrial Mission is also a good example

of liberal thinking, arising out of the work of Ted Wickham in Sheffield it sponsored work completely outside the orbit of the local church through ordained chaplains.

There seems little doubt to me that the classic liberal approach is in decline, losing ground to both those who are more radical (see below) and those who wish to re-emphasise the role of the local church (e.g. community ministry). Nonetheless the idea of the kingdom not the church being the priority remains highly influential. It is also worth mentioning the highly influential work of Moltman who has developed Liberal thinking in many creative directions both towards liberation theology and towards an increasing interest in the Trinity.

4. Erastian

Erastian or established religion might be easily missed in a survey such as this but it has a profound impact and needs to be included. Erastianism¹ is the belief in the unity of state and religion and while this position may not be as thorough-going nowadays as in the 16th century it is still clearly seen in the establishment of the Church of England. Many people still consider that the Establishment gives the church a way to influence social affairs which it otherwise would not have.

The establishment finds a modern expression in the Inner Cities Religious Council which includes all denominations and all religions and provides a forum for religious leaders to input into government policy. The ICRC was set up by the Conservatives but New Labour has continued this trend to increasing religious involvement in urban strategy through its repeated references to faith communities in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. We are still in the process of working out what this means in terms of church involvement with the new Local Strategic Partnerships. Erastian thinking is rooted in passages like Romans 13 which appear to divinely ordain the powers that be, but is perhaps more importantly rooted in the history of Christian Europe. There is suspicion of the establishment, especially amongst nonconformists with their disestablishmentarian history, but the tradition continues to develop with the move to include all faiths within the religious establishment c.f. Prince Charles' desire to be a Defender of Faith rather than a Defender of the (Anglican) Faith.

5. Radical

In strong contrast to the Erastian tradition is the radical tradition with its concern for injustice and freedom. This can trace its roots back to medieval rebels such as the priest John Ball who fomented the peasants revolt, the digger Gerald Winstanley, Unitarian radicals such as Joseph Priestley (whose nonconformist republicanism had a stronghold in Hackney) and other more recent Christian radicals such as Dorothy Day. Through the 19th-century radicalism lost its Christian roots as it developed a secular socialist character but the development of theologies of liberation (Third World, black, gay and feminist) has reinvigorated the radical Christian tradition.

Radicalism is a strand in much Christian activism throughout East London but found a particular expression in the Sunday Ogunwobi sanctuary and in some other immigration and antiracist campaigns. Nationally the Urban Theology Unit has been an important promulgator of radical ideas as in its concern to develop a British liberation theology.

Radicalism can tend towards socialism but not necessarily, it can be green or anarchist in orientation or more explicitly theological as in the Anabaptist tradition which is of continuing importance, particularly through the influence of the Mennonite Centre in Highgate. It was also an important influence on the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, especially through the work of Jim Punton.

6. Charismatic

The charismatic tradition has often tended to shy away from social involvement, tending to take its cue from fundamentalist evangelicalism but it has begun to develop its own distinctive forms of social involvement. These have tended to focus on spiritual warfare where prayer has been used as a weapon to confront injustice and poverty. Otherwise charismatic social involvement tends to be fairly individualistic with an emphasis upon deliverance and healing ministries.

Probably the best example of urban charismatic social involvement is the Ichthus church based in southeast London. They have been unusual amongst the house churches in emphasising social involvement. The well-known PECAN employment training project (see social democracy) which inspired a number of Hackney projects, arose out of the Ichthus scene. Another face of charismatic social involvement is seen in the magazine Prophecy Today which has a more apocalyptic emphasis. The theology of charismatic social involvement is underdeveloped. Generally it follows Evangelical thinking, some are drawn to radical Anabaptist thinking, others major on spiritual warfare. It is distinct from but not unrelated to the African Pentecostal tradition discussed below, especially in the concern for spiritual warfare.

¹ Properly speaking Erastianism is the belief that the state should have supremacy over the church in ecclesiastical matters

7. African Pentecostal

African Pentecostal social involvement is the newest arrival on the scene in East London. I would argue that it is important to see it as a distinct force despite its roots in the Evangelical and charismatic traditions. What seems to me distinctive about the tradition is the emphasis upon personal and community empowerment. Tremendous energy is generated by a *can do* attitude which takes on large projects with an unshakeable belief in final success through prayer and dedicated commitment.

Kingsway International Christian Church is perhaps the best-known of these churches but there are many other smaller groups who are not able to be quite as ambitious as KICC's proposed development in Hackney Wick. Immigration concerns are often an issue arising out of the African community but perhaps a more distinctive aspect of African Pentecostal social involvement is the running of supplementary schools.

The tendency towards 'prosperity gospel' teaching is often a feature of this tradition and often makes those in more traditional churches sceptical, as does what often seem extravagant claims for healing. These emphases could perhaps be seen as the more right-wing dimension of African Pentecostalism, there are other more radical expressions which engage with a wider range of community issues.

Political positions

8. Socialist

Socialism has had a long-standing impact on Christian social involvement and has developed into a specific Christian Socialist tradition. This tradition started in Victorian England with the theologian FD Maurice (whose father was a Unitarian minister in Hackney!) and was given concrete expression through certain of the slum ritualist priests. It has remained a living tradition up until this day, finding particular expression in the thought of William Temple and RH Tawney.

The work of Ken Leech in the East End and the Jubilee Group is an archetypal example of Christian socialism at work -- having a political edge whilst remaining rooted in grass-roots reality. Leech's concern with racial Justice is typical of the Christian Socialist concern with equality. Bob Holman is another contemporary example of the Christian Socialist tradition combining incisive social analysis with grass-roots activism.

Christian socialism has a continuing political impact. Early figures like George Lansbury, the important but now neglected MP for Poplar and leader of the Labour Party, brought Christian values into the political mainstream. Blair's Christian socialism has revived the tradition in mainstream politics but is of a conservative nature emphasising social cohesion rather than inequality. He is in stark contrast to the Socialist radicalism of Tony Benn² who roots English socialism in nonconformist religion rather than Marx.

9. Conservative

Conservatism has had as great an impact on Christian social involvement as socialism although it is perhaps not such an important influence in East London. It obviously has certain connections with the establishment position outlined above but it has moved on from the traditional links between the Conservative party and the Anglican church. It is rooted in notions of "one nation" Conservatism and of "family values".

The typical concern of people influenced by Christian conservatism has become the abortion issue which finds expression in pregnancy support and counselling projects and in political activism around the issue. They tend to be involved in other family issues such as marriage counselling and parent education.

Organisations like CARE, SPUC and the Conservative Family Association are significant agents of Christian conservatism. It has particularly taken root amongst the charismatic house churches and certain sections of the Roman Catholic Church.

10. Social Democratic

The social Democratic tradition is perhaps the most difficult to get a handle on because it is presently the dominant political force. With the demise of socialism many Christians seem to have slipped into social Democratic ways of thinking and acting without any clear theological reasons. Maybe the contemporary methodologies discussed below are attempts to develop a theology for left inclined Christians in a post Socialist age.

Social democracy can be seen in the work of many Christian projects, typical of which, perhaps, are the many employment training programmes which Christians have become involved in. These are

² Benn's maternal grandfather was a Congregationalist minister in East London

explicitly part of the capitalist economy but enable Christians to make a distinctive contribution through their grass-roots involvement. One of the most high-profile of these projects is the PECAN project in Southwark which was inspiration for projects like Access and the Kingsmead Kabin.

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is perhaps the key document which Christian social involvement now needs to respond to. Some of its roots are undoubtedly Christian -- a comparison of it with Faith in the City would be an interesting exercise, for instance. The underlying issue for Christians would seem to me to be how much they want to buy in to its agenda and how much develop their own distinctive visions rooted in alternative traditions.

11. Anarchist/green

The anarchist tradition³ has always been present in England even if only as a minority but with the development of green politics it has raised its profile and had some influence on certain sections of Christian social activism. It has been rooted in a countercultural stance which looks for alternatives to both capitalism and socialism, and perhaps for this reason has attracted Christians looking for a distinctive third way. There are clearly connections with the radical tradition, with feminism and with groups like the Quakers but there is a distinctive ethos that is most visibly expressed in the Antiglobalisation campaigns.

Christians influenced by anarchism are most likely to get involved in small-scale co-operative enterprises such as whole food co-operatives or bicycle shops. Some may also be involved in green politics, squatting campaigns or the more familiar Antiglobalisation demonstrations. I am not aware of any churches that are primarily driven by an anarchist agenda but its influence can be discerned in the number of places.

A good contemporary example of Christian anarchism is the Australian Dave Andrews who has written books such as *Christianarchy* which arises out of his grass-roots urban experience in Australia. Theologically anarchists tend to be anti-church and anti-religion emphasising Jesus-centred Christianity, and influenced by feminism and the green movement. Creation-centred spirituality, inspired by the work of Matthew Fox is also a significant influence in some places, although it is probably pushing it a bit to label this as anarchist it is clearly rooted in green concerns.

12. Ethnic/grassroots

There is another tradition of Christian social involvement which needs to be acknowledged although it is distinctive in that it very clearly arises out of a specific context rather than a set of beliefs. It is rooted in the experience of (normally) ethnic groups that have been marginalised and found that their distinctive needs are not being met by mainstream provision. This is most clearly seen, for Christians, amongst the Caribbean origin churches and the various projects they have developed over the years.

The typical Caribbean project is perhaps a lunch club for elderly Caribbean people which provides them with Caribbean food and a conducive cultural atmosphere. Some of them might extend out into other concerns such as drugs work and relationships with the police.

The theology of grass-roots projects may not be articulated with great sophistication but does tend to be rooted in the clear sense of Christian calling. They will typically have recourse to basic biblical themes such as being salt and light and loving one's neighbour. There is often a reluctance to engage in political activity or with what is considered good practice in the rest of the voluntary sector. More radical developments of this tradition such as Robert Beckford's *Jesus Is Dread* tend to look to liberation theology for inspiration.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch with us at CANDL. There is an expanded version of this paper which we can e-mail to you at your request.

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³ I'm using anarchist in a fairly loose sense of countercultural scepticism of government rather than a strict belief in the abolition of all government