

Chapter 19

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS THE GOOD OF THE CITY

It is now time to bring the argument of the preceding pages to some kind of conclusion. Is it proper to speak of 'a Christian society'? If by that phrase we mean a society in which the Christian belief so controls all public life as to suppress and exclude alternative beliefs, we must answer that we ought not to have any such goal in mind. The age-long domination of the territorial principle was decisively ended at the Enlightenment, and there can be no going back on that crucial event in the history of the world. Two centuries of religious freedom have taught us so to value it that we can never surrender it. But now, two centuries after the Enlightenment, we are discovering that the principles developed at the Enlightenment cannot in the long run sustain religious freedom. This freedom is increasingly threatened by religious movements which claim absolute control over all life. The only ultimately secure ground for religious freedom is in the fact that Almighty God, in the act of revealing his sovereign power and wisdom in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has at the same time established for his world a space and a time during which faith is possible because unbelief is also possible. And if we are tempted to cry out to God in impatience because He allows so much wickedness still to flourish in his world, we know that the answer to our cry is in his long, long patience which, as the Apostle tells us, is to lead us to repentance

I am sure that this is the critical point for all debate about the Gospel as public truth. Christians agree with Muslims that God's will is to be done in the public no less than in the private sphere. The question is: what kind of obedience does God desire? The central affirmation of the Gospel concerning the cross and resurrection of Jesus requires us to affirm that God desires only the freely-given, eager, loving obedience of a child who loves and trusts the father. God does not coerce us with the threat of immediate punishment. He woos us, draws us to himself by taking upon himself the awful cost of our disobedience. Certainly the wrath of God against sin is a reality. Certainly God has provided parameters to be

policed by the political authority so that our freedom may not lead to total self-destruction. But at the central point, at the point of the ultimate allegiance of the heart, God desires only a freely-given obedience which is the expression of love. It follows that while the state with its coercive power has a necessary place in God's wise ordering of the world, for without it our anarchic and disordered wills would destroy the world, yet the state has only a limited mandate. It may not encroach upon that central and secret place where we at our deepest and most intimate are called upon to give our final love and allegiance to our Creator.

But this repentance must lead us to action; action in the public world of which our own personal lives are an integral part and for which we have a responsibility entrusted to us by God. We are, as Jeremiah reminded the exiles in Babylon, to seek the good of the city where we dwell. We are to look for the fruit of the Gospel in the public life of society. There is no need for us to be timid or embarrassed about seeking a privileged position for the Christian faith in the public life of the nation. It is obvious that in our present western societies this privileged position is occupied by another set of beliefs. These beliefs are often, if not very accurately, described as 'secular humanism'. This is not a very satisfactory name for what may perhaps be better called 'naturalism' since the essential point of them is the belief that the whole of reality can be explained without reference to anything beyond the natural world. It is surely beyond question that both in government and in the centres of learning and teaching, it is this set of beliefs which has the privileged position. Particular religious beliefs, such as those of Christians, are only admitted, if at all, by courtesy. More often they are excluded altogether, as many recent events have shown. If we seek, as we ought to seek, a privileged position for the Christian faith in the public domain, this is not, let it be said once again, to exclude or prohibit beliefs but to provide the only foundation upon which freedom of belief is in the long run possible.

Such a privileged position is never won or held except as the result of long intellectual and spiritual struggle. Here I think we come to the heart of the matter. Human society can only flourish if there is vigorous and continuous struggle for the truth. We can never accept, even though we are tempted to do so, the vision of

a future state of society in which this struggle is no longer necessary and in which all our different beliefs can simply continue side by side as private opinions. On the basis of the Christian Gospel we must affirm that until the coming of Jesus and the end of this present age we are not given the option of living in cosy and secure mental bunkers, but are required to live in the open field where truth and falsehood struggle.

To the end of history we are called upon to be witnesses to the truth in a world where it is contradicted, to engage in the kind of discourse in which through our struggle we learn more of the truth, and always to remain thankful to the God whose providence creates a world in which falsehood can still exist without destroying us. At the end of the season of Promenade concerts in the Albert Hall, which are such a wonderful feature of life in London in the summer and autumn, a huge crowd of mostly young people sing with enormous enthusiasm the words of Blake's poem: 'I will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land'. I often wonder what they think they mean as they join with total abandon in this exhilarating song. Certainly we do not build Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem is a gift from God sent down from heaven, but we are not invited in the gospel merely to sit back and wait for its arrival. We are in that period between Christ's coming and his coming again when we are called upon to put upon us the whole armour of God, and to fight not against human beings ('flesh and blood') but against those spiritual powers which so subtly, and yet often so blatantly, take over the great institutions and movements of public life.

The weapons of this warfare are those which St Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesians. There is first of all the shield of faith, that tough faith which refuses to be intimidated or bamboozled by all the endless attacks upon it which are new in every generation. There is the helmet of salvation, the knowledge of the great reality of God's accomplished work in Jesus Christ which saves us from the temptation to keep our heads down when the weapons are flying around, and enables us to look straight forward and recognise the realities in front of us. There is the sword of the spirit which is the word of God, the word of God present in

Jesus Christ made known to us in the scriptures, and made powerful and living for this day in the faithful preaching of the word in the power of the spirit. And above all there is prayer, the prayer of all the faithful, that mighty power which Jesus so often calls us to exercise and to which we can set no limits.

As long as life is given to us on earth we are not permitted to lay aside these weapons. We do indeed look forward with eager longing to that Christian society which is the final goal of all God's creative and redemptive love, but until that day we are called upon to seek on earth a society which, as far as may be granted to us, reflects the glory of the city to which we look forward.