

Poverty, Justice and Virtue

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The UK Coalition government has recently unveiled plans for a wide-ranging reform of the welfare benefits system. This, in summary, involves three things. First, switching from a confusing number of myriad entitlements to one universal credit system. Second, ensuring that those who pass from unemployment to work don't lose too much benefit all at once, thereby ensuring that it will 'pay to work'. Third, an extended programme of supposed 'workfare' with somewhat increased sanctions against those who will not take jobs or do voluntary work in the community.

The first two components can be seen as belonging to the 'big society' and 'red tory' aspect of the Coalition agenda. They should result in a net transfer of resources from the relatively well-off to the poor. Public opinion, media commentators from right to left, the majority of the working-class and the Labour party has broadly welcomed them, though with various minor but legitimate quibbles and cavils.

But where does the third component belong? To the 'big society' or to the 'Thatcherism mark three' (Blairism being mark two) that largely characterises the Coalition's macroeconomic policy so far, including unnecessarily large Treasury cuts to the welfare budget?

One can note here that Douglas Alexander, for the Labour Party, has so far been more cautious in his criticisms of new coalition plans for 'workfare' than has Archbishop Rowan Williams. Which reaction is politically the wiser and the more ethical?

To answer this question, it is useful to put in question the typical modern attitude to poverty. This can be summed up as *the poor are not us*. For the neoliberal right the poor are either inevitable sacrifices to market logic, or else they are a bunch of lazy misfits who need to pull themselves together. For the statist left they are passive victims of systematic economic injustice. In neither case are the poor seen primarily as social actors and continued participants in community.

This contrasts with an older and more Christian attitude. But why should the latter concern us?

For two reasons: first, the minister responsible for the changes, Ian Duncan-Smith, is a devout Roman Catholic, who underwent a 'Damascus conversion' from social Thatcherism after he ceased to be Tory leader. He regards his proposals as being in line with Catholic social teaching. This has resulted in some profoundly unfair comment: recently he described it as 'a sin' that most new jobs were taken by immigrants and not by unemployed British workers. Clearly he was using 'sin' here in a loose metaphorical way. But quickly it was claimed in the press that Duncan-Smith thought that refusing to take a job was a 'sin'. Yet it is evident that his intent is not to moralise, but to break a culture of 'welfare dependency' from which the poor suffer

worst of all. In the UK welfare, contrary to the intentions of William Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, has become too much a ceiling rather than a safety-net. This has indeed resulted in abject dependency stretching over three generations, producing many incapacitated people who cannot compete with more skilled immigrants.

Second, the entire notion of 'welfare' is of Christian origins. Philanthropy in the pagan world was marginal: the whole apparatus of systematic almsgiving, almshouses, leper colonies, maternity hospitals, general hospitals, hostels for travelers, orphanages, charity schools etc is a Christian phenomenon. And all our attitudes and conflicts with respect to issues of public charity derive from principles and arguments within medieval canon law. When the state gradually replaced the church as the provider of welfare in the modern era, there was as much continuity as rupture.

Nonetheless, rupture was real. Eventually we lost the Christian attitude to welfare which can be summed up as: *the poor are us*. Like all human beings they are subject to the vagaries of fortune, only in their case to an extreme degree. The outcome of fortune is a compound of structural circumstance, inheritance of wealth and talent, plus the exercise of effort and virtue. Those who are *unfortunate* remain part of us: they are our neighbours, and so they need to be included within local society.

That means helping them in every way possible, both to meet their needs and to develop their ability to help themselves. In turn, poorer people may be expected to make what contribution to the community they can, because to ask for this is to respect their continued dignity as human beings.

This twin response stems from the equally dual Christian view of poverty. On the one hand, it can lead to unacceptable material suffering, besides spiritual degradation and temptation -- even though the spiritual dangers of wealth are far greater. On the other hand, being poor does not destroy one's capacity to act humanly in the most important ways: to love, to rejoice, to mourn, to show sympathy.

Thus notions of entitlement were mingled with notions of duty from the outset of Christian discussions of charity and welfare. It is a myth to say, as many still do, that questions of 'moral desert' with respect to poverty only arrived in the modern period. For already in the 12th C founding text of canon law, Gratian's *Decretals*, an attempt was made to reconcile the view of the Church Father John Chrysostom, that charity should be one-way and indiscriminate, with the view of St Paul (if you want to eat, you must work) and Augustine that it must be mutual, and therefore discriminate between those genuinely in need on the one hand, and the lazy or criminal on the other. This did *not* however amount to the later sharp divide between 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor', because the canonists thought much more in terms of *degrees* of genuine need. Also they insisted that the benefit of the doubt had to go to the apparently poor person. This has by no means been true for most of modernity.

How does so-called 'workfare' look in the light of these principles of authentic Christian tradition? The answer is: 'ambivalent', and therefore the Labour Party is right to suspend its judgement. For insisting on some time spent on work and training as a condition of receiving benefit (roughly what is proposed by Ian Duncan-Smith)

could mean including the poor in local structures of reciprocity, rather than marginalising them either as mere victims, or as supposed social parasites. It could mean that the unemployed and their communities think out between them new creative tasks that the unemployed might usefully help with – for example new projects of environmental improvement. Such involvement can assist the unemployed to return to the habit of work and begin to equip them with skills.

Here it is important to say that one aspect of the new proposals that has been insufficiently discussed is their intention to increase the interpersonal factor and the proactive role played by front-line administrators. For if all benefits are rolled into one credit, then this will necessitate many fine judgements as to exact needs being made by welfare-workers in discussion with the unemployed themselves. It is to be hoped that the same spirit can be extended the organisation of work and training projects for the unemployed – including for ex-prisoners, who most of all (as all evidence shows) need the structure of work if they are not to re-offend.

Douglas Alexander is, however, correct to say that ‘workfare’ will not lead to jobs if there are no jobs available, as is increasingly the case everywhere. All the same, we need again to overcome either a pseudo-radical fatalism about this circumstance, or else a neoliberal view that it is merely ‘up to individuals’. Instead, we need to foment the idea that local *co-operation* can lead to the creation of new enterprises, even though we do indeed need government policies and legal and financial structures that would favour such developments.

Moreover, the Archbishop’s much more adamant fears are by no means unwarranted. ‘Workfare’ could indeed mean a continuation of a centralised attempt to discipline and corral the poor as though they were social lepers -- and getting them to pick up litter in a humiliating fashion would certainly not be good enough. This process of ‘enclosure’ of the poor reached its acme with the Victorian workhouse, but has been going on ever since Henry VIII seized control of parish structures from the power of voluntary fraternities.

Nevertheless, fully to comprehend our current conjuncture, and continued arguments about the role of state provision, we have to grasp the ambiguity of this secularization of welfare, which in England began with the Tudors. The distinguished medieval historian Brian Tierney, who is no romantic, has said that the church-controlled system of poor relief of the 13th C was probably the most successful before the 20th C. (Though he crucially adds that ‘that is not saying much’.) Even though it involved variously voluntary, official parish and monastic contributions, it was not the ‘random’ affair denounced earlier by the Fabian Webbs, because the parish priest and trustees acted as coordinator. But the rise of a money economy, commutation of manorial duties to rents, the Black Death and agricultural enclosure all conspired to destroy the effectiveness of this local system. Peasants passed from serfdom to wage-exploitation and many of them hit the road in increasingly vast numbers. At the same time, parish structures were undermined by absentee clergy, plural rectorships and monastic appropriation of livings often enacted in the interests of material gain, which were all partially the result of excessive church centralization, clericalisation and bureaucratization right across Europe

The new problem that arose in consequence of both those trends is one that we are still struggling with today. How, on the one hand to restore the primacy of locality and reciprocity and how, on the other, to deal fairly with people who, at least for the moment, are on the move, and with the many who are likely to remain on the move in an increasingly fluid world? The canon lawyers, as most historians agree, failed to solve this one. This was part of the way in which ‘the long Patristic period’ came to an end after 1300. Hence to some degree the Post-Reformation state in England, even though it gratuitously destroyed perfectly good local ecclesial structures, also tried to deal with a problem which the somewhat corrupted late-medieval Church had evaded: the new vagrancy. So one reason for the increased attention to the question of ‘desert’ was the vastly-increased number of people unemployed for both structural and criminal reasons, which required judicial discrimination.

Nevertheless, canonic legal blindness was perpetuated in the way in which too much emphasis was placed on keeping people in one place and administering charity only in to those taken to belong there. Indeed these tendencies increased, in accordance with the sterile direction of later medieval canon law itself. Thus the whole Foucauldian ‘discipline and punish’ approach to the poor took increasing root. Yet at the same time, the Tudors borrowed also from the canonists something more positive: namely the restored 13th C view that the richer could be *compelled* to give alms, which were a matter of justice as well as of charity. Moreover, even though the state was now taking a new legislative role, the organization of poor relief continued for a very long time to be on an ecclesiastical parish basis that perpetuated in a restricted form many medieval procedures right up to the beginning of the 19th C.

It’s important then to see just what a morally and politico-theologically ambivalent legacy we are the heirs of, when it comes to the treatment of the poor.

Let us hope, in this context, that ‘workfare’ will mean a return to the mutualist, ‘big society’ spirit of the 13th C and will not be a draconian neoliberal palliative. Nor should it mean denying our duty to meet basic material human needs even of the inadequate as opposed to those earning criminal incomes. Again, the new proposals envisage a greater role being given to frontline judgement in this instance also. And this meeting of needs must include the provision of housing in one’s local area, as Williams demands. Because excessive levels of housing benefit cannot, as the Coalition rightly argues, be justified, this problem needs to be dealt with in terms of increased levels of housing supply and the securing, by whatever means, of fair levels of rent.

This ‘big society’ approach involves therefore an attempt to restore the priority of the local. However, we need to realise that the new exigencies of market and labour mobility faced by the Tudors confront us today all the more. On the one hand, we should try to limit the need for people to move against their will, just for the sake of finding work, thereby causing social disruption. On the other hand, we have also to extend that hospitality to the stranger which the first canonists embraced and the later ones tended to play-down – so long as this is not at the expense of those already resident. In addition we need a national co-ordination which will take account of different costs, different rent-prices, different housing and different job-creation needs in different regions, in the interest of sustaining rather than destroying local

communities. It is by no means at present clear that the Coalition measures will meet all these criteria.

There is one final and crucial twist. I have argued above that the oldest and most authentic Christian principles suggest that money given to the poor must sometimes require that they give something in return. But if that is so, then this rule must apply all the more to all the rest of us. For if the poor are us, then *we are also the poor*, at bottom entirely dependent on the bounty of nature and the gifts of other human beings.

It follows that the wealthier should *also* receive as reward, in terms of salaries, bonuses and state benefits, only what can be justified in terms of both their needs and their social contribution.

Thus while Williams is right to worry, Alexander is still more right to hesitate, because if 'workfare' invokes mutual fairness then this implies that such a principle should be applied all the way up.

And that would be both radical and Christian.