

# THE SOUL AND THE CITY: URBAN MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY 1956-2006

The Samuel Ferguson Lecture 2006 given at the  
University of Manchester on 19th October 2006

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When my dear friend the late David Nicholls gave the William Temple Association Lectures some years ago, he began by saying that 'like all good lectures, they are (for want of a better term) half-baked. They represent an interim report on work in progress rather than a final and balanced statement'. I feel in much the same position – and I must be in good company since Kathleen Richardson in her foreword to *Faithful Cities* also says that it represents 'work in progress'! – as I attempt four things.

The first is to look briefly at some of the main historical moments, trends and developments – global, national and local – which have affected urban ministry and theology during this 50 year period from 1956 to the present. Secondly, I want to look at some of the important urban strategies and initiatives, inside and outside the churches, which have characterized this period. Thirdly, I want to identify some of the key issues, crises, *kairos* moments, which have been – or could have been – central to these years. Finally, I want to raise questions about how urban theological work has changed and is still changing over these years.

This is probably an impossible task, and I am all too conscious of the danger of covering too much ground superficially, but at least I can make a start which others can follow, expand, critique or refute. It is difficult to separate the history from the recurring and contrasting themes, and theological thinking from the practice of ministry, and I shall move back and forth across time, and across disciplines, hopefully in a way which illuminates and does not confuse.

But first I need to give you some autobiographical material. I grew up in the Ashton-under-Lyne area, and began to take Christianity seriously as a teenager in the mid-1950s. I went to London as a student in 1958, lived in the East End, and stayed there for most of the next 46 years. I cannot therefore speak 'objectively'. I have been personally involved in this fifty year period: this history is part of my history. 1956-58 was a critical period for me in terms of trying to sort out what I believed. Most of this happened in Ashton-under-

Lyne, Dukinfield and Hyde, part of what is now called Tameside. Two important influences on my search for a deep and intelligent Christian faith were Pastor Jack Ford of the Church of the Nazarene in Ashton with whom I corresponded at length in these years, and who, I think, was disappointed that I abandoned the Church of the Nazarene for Anglo-Catholicism – an experience I share with John Milbank! – and the (then very young) philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who helped me to answer the question ‘Can I be a Christian and remain an intelligent human being?’ in the affirmative. We worshipped in the same parish in Hyde for about three years.

The bulk of my time in London was spent in a couple of square miles of the East End – Cable Street, the cafe quarter and social centre of the old London Docks in the late 50s and early 60s, going north to Shoreditch in 1964, back south to Bethnal Green for most of the 70s, and finally, from 1990 to 2004, Aldgate and Whitechapel. During these years I became heavily involved with ministry around issues of drug abuse, homelessness, and racism, to some aspects of which I will refer later. But back to 1956.

## **1: Looking at History – main historical moments**

1956 was an extraordinary year. There was the Suez fiasco which led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Anthony Eden, the Russian invasion of Hungary, Khrushchev’s speech to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, and the exodus of many from the Communist Parties around the world. Anthony Crosland, a key Labour Party theoretician of the centre left – who would no doubt be considered very left-wing in today’s climate – published his *The Future of Socialism*. John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ was performed, and the term ‘angry young man’ came into fashion. (It had been coined earlier by the Anglican layman Leslie Paul – who later wrote a report on clergy deployment – in his book *Angry Young Man* of 1952). The BBC Light Programme launched Saturday Skiffle Club with Lonnie Donegan, and Nancy Whiskey, Johnny Duncan and the Blue Grass Boys. It was the era of Teddy Boys, and there was violence during the showing of the film ‘Rock Around the Clock’, though the popular band leader Ted Heath had assured us: ‘I don’t think rock ‘n’ roll will come to Britain. It is primarily for the coloured population’. The Labour Party was torn apart over nuclear disarmament. The following year the new Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said that most people had ‘never had it so good’. I strongly suggest that every one of these events has had its effects on the thinking, consciousness, practice and worship of the churches in the subsequent years.

Within the field of urban studies, the activity of sociologists was well under way by 1956. Michael Young, the pioneer of community studies and much else – he wrote the Labour Party manifesto for the 1945 General Election, and founded *Which?* and the Open University – had set up the Institute of Community Studies in Bethnal Green in 1952, and the classic study by Young and Peter Willmott *Family and Kinship in East London* appeared in 1957, and was read all over the world. In 1954 Ruth Glass, with the architect Sir William Holford, had set up the Centre for Urban Studies at University College, London, the first of many such centres, and she remained in charge of it for almost thirty-five years. She was a harsh critic of what she termed ‘urban demonology’, with its roots in what, in a report for UNESCO on urban sociology in Britain in 1955, she called the long British tradition of anti-urbanism (Glass 1955:14:). She was still expressing alarm at anti-urbanism in a ferocious attack in 1976 on ‘the language of the international planning prophets’. (We can all think of parallels closer to our own day!)

It is a curious, inert idiom – a caricature of bureaucratic jargon, with a small monotonous vocabulary. The mainstays are a few words – environment, development, dimension, strategy, integration, and the like – used in bulk as nouns or adjectives, and almost invariably with the prefix ‘human’ (as though the authors had to affirm their humanist credentials) [...] the main message is unmistakable: the city is the scapegoat for our troubles. And so the blame gets shifted from the impersonal entity, the city, to the people who are supposed to swell the crowds and problems of cities – migrants from rural areas or immigrants from abroad. They are regarded as the culprits – whether or not they do play any such role. (Glass 1976)

Two years before Glass’s 1955 report, Sir Frederick Gibberd, the designer of Harlow New Town, wrote that ‘it is now generally agreed that the large city leads only to social evil’ (Gibberd 1979).

Urban demonology, of course, was not restricted to sociologists and political writers: theologians played their part. For Jacques Ellul, writing in 1970:

The city is cursed. She is condemned to death because of everything she represents [...] All the inhabitants of the city are destined sooner or later to become prostitutes and members of the proletariat (Ellul 1970:45, 55).

In 1958 the disturbances in North Kensington, where West Indians came under attack, fuelled calls for immigration control, and the Tory MP for Louth Cyril Osborne toured the country warning of a ‘coffee coloured Britain’ and proclaiming his belief that Britain was a white man’s country. It was the anti-immigrant polemic before, and particularly immediately after, the 1958 disturbances which led to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962. In the debates on the bill Archbishop Ramsey described it as ‘this lamentable bill

[...] this bill which is indeed deplorable'. It was to form the basis of all future immigration policy.

## **2: Pastoral initiatives and strategies 1956-2006**

The 1950s was also a time of experiment and innovation in pastoral ministry, though the movements which were to transform the world church had not yet occurred. Vatican 2, liturgical renewal and new liturgies, the charismatic movement, feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology – these were all movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But there were significant developments in the 50s which are often forgotten – Ernie Southcott's house church movement in Halton, Leeds, described in his book *The Parish Comes Alive* in 1956; Geoffrey Beaumont's Folk Mass, which was followed by north-west developments of the use of folk, jazz and Skiffle in the liturgy at Our Lady and St Thomas in Gorton; the building of new churches such as William Temple, Wythenshawe, and St Paul's, Bow Common, in East London; the Christian-Marxist dialogues, and the expansion of the 'parish communion' movement – which had begun in the 1890s and spread in the 1930s but did not reach the mass of the people until the 1950s. Joost de Blank, Bishop of Stepney wrote *The Parish in Action*, published in 1954, in which he claimed that 'the parish unit is as native to the Church of England as the home is to western civilization' (de Blank 1954: 65). . Ted Wickham wrote his *Church and People in an Industrial City* in 1957. He gave five reasons for the failure of the church in Sheffield; the historic estrangement of the working class; the loss of the middle class, partly due to the church's conformity and pietism; the belief that the industrial environment was alien to faith; the lack of prophecy; and the inadequacy of the parish as the only form of the church's presence. (Wickham 1957: 215ff). While Wickham's work has been subjected to heavy criticism, it was a landmark in the debate over the place of the church in industrial society and among the industrial working class.

There was much activity in these years, and it is often forgotten, but it paved the way for further action and thought. Most of it, however, took place within certain assumed frameworks of thought – the parish (though with concessions made to industrial mission and even worker priests), the establishment, the denominational fragmentation, and the essential Englishness of Christians – although the West Indian population was increasing in these years.

The appalling failure to respond to the new West Indian presence has been documented by Clifford Hill in the 1960s, by Renate and John Wilkinson (Renate Wilkinson 1984; Wilkinson et al 1985; John Wilkinson 1993) in the

1980s and 90s, and by others. Sections of a whole generation of Caribbean Christians were lost to their churches of origin, and, by the time the 'mainstream' churches started to take ethnic minorities seriously, many of them had moved to the New Testament Church of God, the Church of God of Prophecy, the Seventh Day Adventists, and elsewhere. There were, of course, exceptions, such as the legendary Bernard Ball (Brother Bernard) who worked with the Caribbean community in Moss Side from the early 1950s, and later in Old Trafford. But in general the churches missed the opportunity and the challenge.

## The 1960s

What began in the 1950s continued in the more publicized – and more caricatured – 1960s. As one who came to religious and political consciousness in the 1950s, I am horrified at the way in which the succeeding decade is still treated, not least by journalists and politicians. I suspect that they were not there at the time, or, if they were, they were not listening to the turbulent, thoughtful, often inspiring and profound, voices of that complex decade. Some were there and were active, but later trivialized the decade. Take this from Richard Holloway;

The whole decade flashes across my mind like some lunatic kaleidoscope: the Rector of Woolwich pushing a beauty queen through the streets in a wheelbarrow; Malcolm Boyd going on TV to announce with passionate solemnity that Jesus Christ, like all men, had a penis; Canon Montefiore of Cambridge electrifying the world press by saying that Jesus Christ could have been a homosexual; an up-to-date harvest festival in the south of England, in which the liturgy had been written by the vicar, ending with the following responsory: 'Are we happy? You bet your life we're happy!' Appropriately the 60s ended with another awestruck pronouncement from John Robinson. In the pages of the *Sunday Times*, he breathlessly intoned; 'The August issue of *Playboy*...contains some marvelous cinemographic stills of Paula Kelly dancing completely in the nude, pubic hair and all. Nothing could have been more beautiful and entrancing' Ah, the 60s (Holloway 1972: 47-8).

It sounds good, and of course there were such absurdities, but as a summary of that immensely creative decade it is an irresponsible and misleading caricature.

In Christian terms, in Britain, this was the era of Michael Ramsey, perhaps the most memorable Archbishop of Canterbury of the 20th Century. It was also the era of John Robinson's *Honest to God*, published in 1963, and of what became known, quite confusingly, as 'South Bank religion'. Certainly Mervyn Stockwood's time as Bishop of Southwark was of tremendous importance for

the future of urban ministry. It saw the appearance of the Southwark Ordination Course, the appointment of many key figures who influenced the shape of urban ministry, much experimental and innovative work, the mobilization of resistance to the rise of the National Front, and much else. Yet much work was going on in other churches, and in other parts of Anglicanism, without the flamboyance and publicity which Stockwood and his colleagues gave to South London, and received little attention.

The founding of the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield in 1969 was of central importance, and John Vincent has been a key figure well beyond his own Methodist community. It is impossible in a wide ranging lecture to do justice to Vincent's crucial role in developing alternative models of church and of theological education, but it is vital to stress his role in developing more imaginative and contextualized use of the Bible, and his deeply rooted and continuing commitment to the Gospel of Mark in radical discipleship. His latest collection *Mark Gospel of Action: personal and community responses* has appeared within the last few months (Vincent 2006).

Meanwhile, in the USA, the 1960s was the decade which saw the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, the 'death of God', the rise of the counter-culture and the 'underground church', the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr, and the urban uprisings which followed it. The impact of the counter culture, important as it was, has certainly been exaggerated in both the USA and Britain. As Laurie Taylor dryly commented on my own analysis of the period, life in Burslem, Tadcaster and Crewe was not significantly affected (Leech 1973). However, many of the 'new religious movements' which have provided sociologists and anthropologists with plenty of research opportunities, were products of the 1960s counter-culture. The word 'spirituality' started to creep into the vocabulary of a wider range of people.

These were years also when issues of housing and homelessness were causing concern to churches and others in urban areas, and homelessness was changing its character as the traditional skid row male vagrant alcoholic in areas such as London was being overtaken by large numbers of young people from the midlands, the north, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The mid and late 1960s saw a number of church-based initiatives in the fields of housing and homelessness, and some of these have remained to this day, and grown in importance as well as often changing their style and focus – the Simon Community, Shelter, St Mungo's, Christian Action, Centrepont, the Catholic Housing Aid Society (CHAS), and many others. Later CHAS merged with the Churches National Housing Coalition to form Housing Justice, and a few months ago UNLEASH (United London Action with the Single Homeless)

was absorbed into Housing Justice. But all these groups had their origins in responses to events in the urban areas in the 1960s.

## **The 1970s**

The 1970s was a time of rethinking when many Christians were trying to come to terms with the upheavals of the previous decades. In the inner cities, the National Front had been formed, and, while Enoch Powell's speeches after 1968 had postponed its success, it was beginning to impact urban communities after about 1976. These were the years of the Lewisham protests, Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, and the Brick Lane disturbances of 1978 and onwards; and they led to new mobilizations of Christians around resistance to racism, a word which had not been in most dictionaries until the late 1960s. Its origin and spread as a way of distinguishing personal prejudice from structural oppression can be dated fairly precisely to the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism, and specifically to their consultation in Notting Hill in 1969 (Leech 1986, 1999)..

It was not the only word which was not in use before the end of the 60s. The word 'spirituality', urban or otherwise, was hardly in use until the 1970s, while 1968 gave birth to two new terms 'skinheads' and 'Paki bashing'.

The 1970s also saw the appearance of new radical formations among urban Christians – the Jubilee Group, Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice, Christians Against Racism and Fascism, the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, and so on. It was a period when many Christians realized that their closest allies were often from other Christian traditions than their own, and that the older confessional divides were becoming blurred if not irrelevant. Meanwhile the position of the church in the urban cores was causing much concern. Churches were closing in inner city areas while they flourished in the suburbs. Gibson Winter's words of 1961 about 'the suburban captivity of the churches' in the USA were being applied to Britain by commentators such as Eric James, and Winter's analysis was coming to fruition in 1970s Britain. Gabrielle Cox in 1984, reflecting on Moss Side in the context of the setting up of the Archbishops' Commission on Urban Priority Areas, claimed:

What is needed is not an Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, but an Archbishop's Commission on the well-fed, the complacent and the secure. That is what the Church should be looking at. The problem is not that there are too few Christians in the inner city, but that there are too few Christians outside it (Leech and Drummond 1984:15)

An interesting figure to emerge in these years was David Sheppard. His book *Built as a City: God and the urban world today*, published in 1974) traces the shifts in his theology since his first curacy in Islington in the 1960s. Sheppard, appointed Bishop first of Woolwich and later of Liverpool, was of crucial importance in changing the social and political consciousness among the new breed of 'urban evangelicals'. This is sometimes referred to as the 'new evangelical radicalism', and is seen also in the USA in such groups as the Sojourners Community, the Church of the Saviour, and many others. But Sheppard also played a key role in putting and keeping the *Faith in the City* agenda as a high priority for the churches. He was loathed and targeted by the Christian right – the collection of right-wing essays called *The Kindness That Kills* was published to coincide with his TV Dibleby Lecture – and it is said that Mrs Thatcher overruled him as Archbishop of Canterbury. He was particularly disliked because he was, in many respects, part of the establishment.

I hardly need to remind people in Manchester of the importance of Church Action on Poverty, with its offices in Oldham Street except to say that it was part of a growing concern with poverty, low pay, and so on, most marked within the terrible Thatcher years. But Mrs Thatcher achieved what no other recent prime minister had managed to achieve (though Blair is trying hard): she helped to radicalize some quite conservative Christians. It is often said that during these years the churches shifted to the left, and there is some truth in this. But it is arguable that the government had moved so far to the right that the churches – and the Church of England in particular – by staying in the same place, appeared more radical than in fact they were. These years were marked by unemployment, poverty, racism, and many social evils, and the response to them left a permanent mark on Christian social consciences, not least in the urban areas.

## **The 1980s**

It was against this background that the Archbishop's Commission produced *Faith in the City* in 1985. The impact of the report was enormous. It was well researched and thorough. Within a short time of its publication, a conservative (possibly Norman Tebbit) denounced it as Marxist. The fact that such an adjective was not used against *Faithful Cities* is one of many indications of the gulf between the two eras. Yet it is worth briefly pausing to ask what this could have meant. There are many discernible influences in the report – the hands of the sociologist Chelly Halsey, the historian Hugh McLeod, and the theologian Anthony Harvey are clearly visible. Yet Marx is entirely absent.

Nevertheless the *Daily Telegraph* on 2nd December 1985 had a headline 'Tory anger at C of E Marxists', while Auberon Waugh in *The Spectator* of 21st-28th December compared the report to the Beveridge Report, noting that it was 'more overtly Marxist and anti-religious in tone' and referred to 'the Archbishop's explicit adoption of Marx' – a comment which must have surprised that genteel liberal Robert Runcie. I wondered what aspects of Marxist thought they had in mind. Surplus value? The falling rate of profit? Alienation? Dialectical method? Which Marxist theorists did they think had influenced the report? Gramsci? Trotsky? Marx himself? Even to ask such questions is to expose the absurdity of the situation. For 'Marxist' here is not a description but an accusation, apparently rooted in an ignorance not only of Marxism but of the whole tradition of Christian social thought of which the report was an important part.

Nevertheless, there were, in my view, three major weaknesses of the report, and some attention to Marx might have helped them in the first and second. First, it was based on a false, or at least unclear, sociological and religious assumption that the authors spoke on behalf of the majority of the people of England – 'the basic Christian principles of justice and compassion which we believe we share with the great majority of the people of Britain' (ACUPA: xiv). In 1988 I wrote: 'This is a revealing and significant statement, for it excludes from the start the view that Christian principles and values might be in conflict with those of the dominant society' (Leech 1988:147). *Faithful Cities*, quoting these words, comments that 'this notion that the Church has the right to speak about anything on anyone's behalf is open to question' (*Faithful Cities* 2006; 2.15-16). I would have thought it was pretty questionable then.

Secondly, it ignored or only briefly addressed many issues. It recognized the dangers in government policy, but hardly ever addressed capitalism, and, when it did, called it by some other name – the 'highly competitive and consumer-oriented society' or 'the modern consumer economy' (ACUPA:55-56). They wrote about black ethnic minorities but avoided the issue of structural racism. And, like most Anglican writings, it dodged the issues of class. It raised many issues and then ran away from them – such as public schools, the middle class culture of the Church of England, and establishment. It claimed that individualism had 'crept into both public and private life' – as if, having crept in, it could just as easily creep out.

Thirdly, it assumed a theological position which was equally questionable. The theology was actually very weak, and was even defended for being so by the resident theologian Anthony Harvey: 'there was a sense', he wrote, in which we did not want too much theology' (Harvey 1986). The theological basis was summed up in one sentence on page 55:

Christians can hardly be expected to propose a realistic alternative to the entire economic system, but there is ample precedent in the Christian tradition for exposing the system we have to moral judgment. (ACUPA:55)

But this is not at all self-evident. The authors clearly worked within a reformist ideology, well within the cultural conformities of Anglicanism, but it simply cannot be assumed that this is the only Christian option. Indeed what the report saw as based on 'ample precedent' within the tradition, Stanley Hauerwas saw as a major failure in vision and method. Writing over ten years before *Faith in the City*, he argued:

The church's great failure in social ethics has not merely been her willingness to support the status quo, but her inability to stand as an alternative to the current forms of the political (Hauerwas 1974: 7).

## **The churches and racism 1950s onwards**

The consciousness of racism within, as well as outside the churches, was growing, albeit unevenly and slowly in the 1980s, with a prolonged switch from chaplaincy towards prophecy. The Church of England held two consultations, in 1981 in Leicester and in 1987 in Balsall Heath in Birmingham with a view to effecting policy changes within the church structures, some of which have taken place. Heather Walton's report *A Tree God Planted*, published in the mid-1980s, was a landmark in the raising of consciousness among Methodists in Britain. The work of the British Council of Churches Community and Race Relations Unit, and the Catholic Commission for Racial Justice were tremendously important. Yet many white Christians even as late as this did not realize what all the fuss was about. The report of the East London Area Pastoral Assembly of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster, in February 1981 – a rather memorable year for race relations – said that 'many people admitted that very little had been done under this priority. Some found it difficult to identify the problem, and so there was little perception that anything needed to be done.'

## **Some contrasts: USA and UK**

The impact, in 1961, of Gibson Winter's book *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* was enormous, and subsequent decades were to show the truth of his analysis and warnings. Today there are many inner city areas of US cities where many 'mainstream' churches have disappeared, though Roman Catholics, black Pentecostal churches, and Baptists often remain. The creation of the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York City in 1948 was in part the

product of concern about 'the failure of Protestantism to remain in our inner city areas.' The parish became a kind of flagship for urban ministry, and, after the anti-West Indian disturbances in London in 1958, misleadingly termed the 'Notting Hill riots', Donald Soper, president of the Methodist Conference, sent three British ministers – David Mason, Geoffrey Ainger and Norwyn Denny – to learn from East Harlem and apply their insights in Lancaster Road in North Kensington. Many of the EHPP pastors later became famous academics, one of the best known being Letty Russell, a key figure in developing feminist theology. George Webber, whose book on East Harlem *God's Colony in Man's World* appeared in 1960, has played a key role in urban theology and ministry in New York, where he still lives. But it was Bruce Kenrick's moving popular book *Come Out the Wilderness*, published in 1963, which made the EHPP widely known in Britain, and inspired many young clergy and ministers, including myself, to commit themselves to inner city ministry. Kenrick is one of the unsung heroes of 1960s urban ministry, and it was largely his work in Notting Hill which led to the founding of Shelter. He is still alive and lives on Iona.

Important writing from the New York and New Jersey areas in these years included Kilmer Myers, *Light the Dark Streets*, published in 1961, and Paul Moore's *The Church Reclaims the City*, published in 1964 (Myers 1961; Moore 1964). The industrial missions in Detroit and Boston were influenced by those in Sheffield, while industrial work in the Diocese of Los Angeles owed much to Salford. Yet the issue of 'flight' was never far from the surface of North American writing. One pioneer of inner city ministry in Boston, Norman Faramelli, was still having to stress in 1994 that 'the church will never make a major impact in urban ministry unless much of it is acted out on the local level by local congregations' (Faramelli 1994:985).

Another important influence from the USA on work in Britain was the relatively short-lived Urban Training Centre in Chicago, which inspired Donald Reeves's Urban Ministry Project in South London, and I believe also influenced John Vincent's early work. Ironically, in spite of major inner city initiatives – Alinsky's broad based organizing, the work of the Roman Catholic priest Jack Egan, and so on, it was Chicago which manifested what I called 'the urban church in retreat' (Leech 1988), and the suburban captivity of which Winter spoke, with Chicago particularly in mind. It is possible to walk or drive for miles on the south side of the city and find no Anglican churches at all. They have all fled to the suburbs, leaving a weakened Roman church, Baptists and black-led Pentecostal churches in the inner city districts.

In England, unlike the USA, Anglicans never abandoned the inner city though their impact on it was immensely varied. Much of the work done in

the 1950s and 1960s was still geared to the parish model, to clericalism and paternalism, and often based on the assumption that inner city ministry depended on putting the right man in the right place at the right time. There was not much sense, in my view, of the People of God, the *laos*, as a community in its own right. The Church of England may have been more damaged by, and shaped by the clerical caste culture than other churches, but it has been a factor in urban ministry for many years: Much innovative work has been ruined by a change of the clerical personage, and nothing in recent history seems to have made much impact on this.

The language used by Stanley Evans in 1962 reflected the same sense of crisis that had marked Winter's book of the previous year. Evans, an Anglican priest, spent most of his ministry in East and South London. He wrote a good deal but the book which is most relevant to our concerns is very small: *The Church in the Back Streets* (1962), Only 50 pages long, it is a classic, rooted in his experience in the inner city. He coined the term 'the Church Condescending' as a way of describing how good, dedicated people moved into poor areas to minister to (rather than with) those whom they saw as belonging to a lower culture.

Inevitably they saw themselves as missionaries sent to a people of a lower culture, and they can hardly be blamed that they became the executive officers of the Church Condescending. Yet for all that, it is the bitter fruits of the Church Condescending, with all its kindness and desperate desire to do good, that we have inherited....An intelligent man [sic] could have prophesied the reaction of those whose fate it was to be done good to (Evans 1962: 5).

These people were there to 'be done good to'. Evans went on to point out that at a certain stage, when 'these stupid, ungrateful people don't come', the Church Condescending turns into the Church Indignant.

The Church Condescending has given birth to the Church Indignant...Does it need to be pointed out that here is nemesis; that at this point a long process has reached its tragic conclusion; that once you reach the stage of despising people, your attitude to them has ceased to be Christian at all, and that you had best haul down your flag and pack your bags, for you have no function left to fulfill? (Evans 1962: 13).

## **Local Pastoral Strategies**

One of the results of *Faith in the City* was a series of local reports – *Faith in Birmingham*, *Faith in Leeds*, and so on. In Leeds, 'Faith in Leeds' became an ongoing project (Burlet and Reed no date). It seems likely that the follow-up to Faithful Cities will be similar

The period before and after *Faith in the City* was one of immense activity in urban churches. Greg Smith writes of these years;

My own generation of urban mission practitioners who were the vanguard in 1985 are now the Establishment. Those in our networks who were young inner city vicars, community workers, aspiring local councilors or housing academics in 1985 are now bishops, professors, and members of the Commission, and in at least one case a cabinet minister. Meanwhile the striking miners of the 1980s, if they have not already died of industrial diseases, are more likely to be shelf stackers, van drivers or call centre workers about to be replaced by cheaper Indian competitors (Smith 2006).

## **3: Significant Local and Global Changes**

### **Change in religious belonging**

By 1996 religious belonging was 'no longer deviant activity' (Smith 1996:9). In many urban areas practicing Christians are in a minority while Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs are significant presences. However, this is only part of the story, and what is increasingly termed 'faithful capital' or 'religious capital' comes in a variety of forms, arising out of a range of 'faith communities'.

### **New churches**

In Greg Smith's study of the London Borough of Newham in 1998, he identified at least 244 faith-based organizations including 81 Christian congregations of which largest single group were Pentecostal (72). There had clearly been a shift in the centre of gravity of Christian faith and life, and the decline among the so-called mainstream churches (with the exception in some places of the Eastern Orthodox) was counter-balanced by significant increases among black-led Pentecostal churches, independent African churches, post-denominational churches, mostly linked to the 'charismatic renewal', and so on.

Today as I walk the Barking Road, Jesus walks alongside, but in many packages if not incarnations. It's a bit like the No 15 bus, You wait for a messiah for ages, then three come along at once (Smith 1999).

In a later study in 2001, Smith noted that only 17 per cent of respondents, from all faiths, showed a majority white membership. Religion, he concluded, was 'relatively strong and increasingly significant' and constituted 'the largest bank of social capital in Newham' (Smith 2001).

The same phenomenon can be observed throughout the country, as *Faithful Cities* recognizes: The decline, it notes, has mostly affected mainstream churches (2.27). We see the same process in many US cities where Gornik, in 2002, noted 'a shift away from mainline and traditional churches to newer evangelical and Pentecostal churches, a movement that is swiftly altering the religious map of the city' (Gornik 2002:11).

### **The arrival of 'faith communities'**

The increased use of the language of 'faith communities', though not their presence, was a product of the Bush-Blair epoch. Both Bush and Blair draw on religious language in their rhetoric. In Britain, the think tank Demos even spoke of a 'new covenant' between government and faith communities (*Faithful Cities* 2006: 2.35). Both in the USA and the UK, there have been warnings of dangers to the authenticity of Christian faith in too close an alliance with government. Thus Angus Ritchie, writing from East London, warned in 2002 of collusion with 'an agenda antagonistic to that of the gospel' and of taking 'a path which will further deflect churches from reading the signs of the times in a biblically and politically critical way' (Ritchie 2002). *Faithful Cities* is right to stress that 'faithful capital' is both 'a valuable resource and...a source of discomfiture' (*Faithful Cities* 2006: 1:19). Yet exactly a month ago, on 19th September 2006, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington DC reported that only a tiny fraction of black churches in the USA had obtained money under the Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The two main reasons given by the churches for their reluctance to seek such money were the fear that it was a way of reducing government responsibility for action on poverty, and that it might inhibit black ministers from speaking the truth to those in power' (See the report in *National Catholic Reporter*, 29th September 2006).

Worries about the wider implications of an alliance between government and communities of faith have also come from secular liberals. The *New York Times* editorial of 16th October 2006, 'Faith Based Profits', expressed concern

that churches and religious bodies were being given a higher legal and tax status than secular ones, and similar complaints have been heard here.

An issue which has been raised over the whole fifty year period, and which is relevant beyond the faith communities' debates, has been that of 'service versus proclamation'. Has the 'servant church' replaced the preaching of the gospel, or even replaced the prophetic church? Smith, in his short critique of *Faithful Cities* notes its lack of attention to mission. This complaint also has a long pedigree, and led to the departure of William Stringfellow, the radical lawyer, from the East Harlem parish in the 1950s. Stringfellow described his relationship with the EHPP in his book *My People is the Enemy* (1964).

They plunged into all sorts of social work and social action – narcotics, politics, neighbourhood improvement, education, housing, and the rest. They instituted therapy and counselling for addicts, engaged in voter registration, lobbied for new playgrounds, organized PTAs, complained about slum landlords, made themselves a nuisance to those in power around the neighbourhood. It was in many ways an admirable, if idealistic, and in Christian terms naive effort, but they neglected and postponed the proclamation and celebration of the Gospel in East Harlem (Stringfellow 1964:88)

His words continue to trouble and challenge me today as I survey much urban ministry including my own work and life.

Let me say a brief word about *Faithful Cities*, a very different kind of document to *Faith in the City* in style, content and theology, and written within a very different context. As the report itself says, the 'central idea', even 'the big idea', is that of 'faithful capital', a development from the 'social capital' of Bourdieu and Putnam, though it seems to owe more to the latter than the former. The authors claim, correctly that 'faith is now a more dynamic and significant factor in our cities than it was 20 years ago'. Aware of the obvious dangers, they stress that there are 'values that challenge and support government policy'. 'Faithfulness demands a critical rather than a docile partnership with the agencies of regeneration and development' (*Faithful Cities* 2006: 1.21; 1.15; 1.19; 1.24). While I am aware that 'capital' in this kind of language – social, spiritual, religious, faithful capital – is being used metaphorically, I think this does run the risk of losing the nature of capital as part of an exploitative relationship between capital and labour. Resources only become 'capital' in the strict sense within this relationship. The literature on social capital seems weak in regard to class, and much of it reflects the current global neoliberal agenda with a stress on mutual aid (though without Kropotkin's political dimensions) and self-help but not on the reduction of the capitalist class's share in the total social product (Das 2006). The fact that *Faithful Cities*, unlike its predecessor, has not been dubbed

'Marxist' does not mean that they may not have fallen into some of the same traps: it is more likely to mean that it is more in tune with the thinking of today's government than *Faith in the City* was with the government of its day. That in itself is not necessarily a cause for rejoicing.

## 4 How Does Theology Change?

It is often said that the theology articulated in the 1960s was an aberration from which we have now recovered, but I think this is mistaken. Certainly there was much superficiality and lack of balance in the writing, but its overall effect was creative and positive. Much of the work done in this period is still useful, albeit dated in many respects. Politicians and some religious figures are prone to see that decade as a kind of sickness from which we must recover. I see it as the beginning of some really creative thinking on which we need to build.

Some of the figures who became influential in 1960s theology have continued to develop new insights. Take the fascinating figure of Harvey Cox. Cox and his shifts over the years have sometimes been ridiculed, but there is a certain continuity in his thought, combined with an anxiety to learn from changing situations. Laurie Green may be right to criticize his excessive optimism (Green 2000;3,5) but *The Secular City* is still worth reading, and is far more profound and nuanced than the writings of most of its detractors. Cox's recent work on Pentecostalism shows a growing global and transcultural approach, while, in between, he has paid attention to the 'return of the holy' and the place of new forms of religious awareness and practice.

Theology begins to change when the ground on which we stand begins to crumble, or, to change the metaphor, when we find ourselves in the midst of violent storms. This was how many Christians, not least in the urban areas, experienced the 1960s. The sense of turbulence in theology was expressed memorably by the Chicago-based theologian Langdon Gilkey in 1965.

The most significant recent theological development has been the steady dissolution of all those certainties, the washing away of the firm ground on which our generation believed we were safely standing. What we thought was solid earth has turned out to be shifting ice – and in recent years, as the weather has grown steadily warmer, some of us have, in horror, found ourselves staring down into rushing depths of dark water. (Gilkey 1965)

It was not surprising that a number of the influential writings of this period were inspired by Paul's navigational escapades recorded in Acts 27. *Soundings*, edited by Alec Vidler, was followed by *Four Anchors from the Stern*

and *Praying for Daylight*, while the inimitable Eric Mascall contributed his *Up and Down in Adria*. However, this encounter with turbulence has led to new creativity, new approaches, new insights, new methods of working which have served to liberate, to break the mould, to challenge and subvert accepted ways of working.

How does this occur? Clearly it is not inevitable. (Many Christians, confronted by storm, cry out, 'Hide me, O my Saviour, hide / Till the storm of life is past!') A clue lies, I believe. In the notion of 'abnormal discourse' described by Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Rorty argues that much discussion and thought runs along predictable lines, based on certain accepted conventions. Abnormal discourse is 'what happens when someone joins in the discussion who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside....The product of abnormal discourse can be anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution, and there is no discipline which describes it, any more than there is a discipline devoted to the study of the unpredictable or of 'creativity' (Rorty 1980: 5, 320-1). I believe that much of the progress in recent urban theology has come from such abnormal discourse, supported by abnormal practice, which over time has become normal and common.

### **Role of theological reflection and 'doing theology'**

The language of 'doing theology' rather than studying it grew in the 1970s, and was not, and is not, without its problems. In some circles it indicated an impatience with theological rigour and discipline, and with any real engagement with the tradition. Instead it spoke of doing theology on the hoof. And much of it was piecemeal, superficial and incoherent. The students I taught in the early 70s had been encouraged to pursue 'theological reflection', but many were unclear as to what it was.

At the risk of oversimplifying I would identify three kinds of theoretical framework, each rooted in and nourished by practice, over the years. The deductive model, associated in Anglicanism with such theologians as C B Moss, F G Hall, and E L Mascall, was still alive and well in the 1960s, though it was fading. It saw doctrine and dogma as prior to action, action being deduced from, and often a causal result of, the correct understanding of doctrine. Then in the 1960s and 1970s there was a period of radical questioning of this way of doing theology. Liberation theologians stressed theology as 'the second step' which was preceded by contemplation and the pursuit of justice. Theology on this model was more reflective than deductive: practice preceded theory. And, particularly since the 1980s, there has been a

recovery of the idea of tradition, but tradition in struggle, in ferment, in encounter with movements in philosophy and with the cultures of postmodernity, a movement seen in Radical Orthodoxy and other current streams.

Theological education was greatly affected by the creation of the Southwark Ordination Course in 1959, and of the Urban Theology Unit ten years later, while the Urban Training Centre in Chicago inspired Donald Reeves to establish the Urban Ministry Project in South London. Nevertheless I am not sure if the expansion of the *content* of theological curricula has been accompanied by any serious rethinking of theological *method*, at least within the academic institutions. Radical ideas may flourish but they are not supported and nourished by radical shifts in the *character* of the community within which study and discourse occur.

However, there have been some important shifts, at least here and there. Let me mention four interrelated ones. First, theology is increasingly seen as, in part, engagement with, and reflection on, lived experience, a process which may lead to critical review and reinterpretation of much in revealed tradition. One implication of this is that the personality, personal history and personal location of the theologian can no longer be omitted from theological work. Throughout the 1950s, theology was written with no reference to the theologian himself or herself, and with no indication of the social, political or economic context of the work. Like most researchers, the theologian was seen as standing outside the data, looking in from a standpoint of objectivity. Much of it could have been written anywhere, even on the moon. It was detached, neutral, 'objective'. However in 1951, two books appeared which contained time bombs which were to explode all over the intellectual world, eventually affecting theologians, most of whom had never read the books, but were affected by the explosions.

William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words* looked at the implications of quantum mechanics for poetry. Empson wrote:

The idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error, and crops up all over the place (Empson 1951: 445).

In the same year Michael Polanyi's Gifford Lectures appeared entitled *Personal Knowledge*. They undermined the simplistic division between subject and object, showing that human beings are participants in the process of knowing, and pointing to the need to develop a participatory consciousness. The scientific researcher, like all researchers, is part of the world he or she studies (Polanyi 1958). I believe this realization has significantly changed

theological work, not least in the urban areas, so that 'contextual theology' has to take both the personal and socio-political context seriously.

Secondly, it is increasingly seen that the relationship between tradition and contemporary turbulence, does not entail the rejection of tradition. Indeed traditions which cannot survive the rigours of radical interrogation and renewal become one-dimensional and fossilized. The only traditions which are free to internal conflict are, as MacIntyre has stressed, extinct. Yet, as he goes on to stress, those who are outside of all traditions are in a state of intellectual and moral destitution, speaking the languages of everywhere and of nowhere (MacIntyre 1981).

Thirdly, it seems to me that one regrettable development, in some places, has been the reduction of theology to social analysis: I believe that this is not a renewal of theology, but its abandonment and replacement. There needs to be interdisciplinary encounter, struggle and, where possible, cooperation, between disciplines. The collapse of one into the other deprives us of these possibilities.

Fourthly, there has been a rise of local contextual theologies and 'specific theologies'. The work of Robert Schreier from Chicago has been important here, and his book *Constructing Local Theologies* has inspired other writings. John Reader in Worcestershire has looked at local theology from a rural perspective, and my new book *Doing Theology in Altab Ali Park* tries to look at it from the context of Whitechapel Road. Rowan Williams has said that we all learn our theology with a local accent, and this is true of how we do theology.

Fifthly, throughout much of what is now called 'practical theology', there has been a certain impatience with theory, and a desire to 'get on with the job'. This is a recipe for disaster

One thing which is clear, although not recognized universally, is that the 'pure theology' of former years cannot exist at all, except at the level of unconscious delusion. Juan Luis Segundo used to refer to theology which was done in 'antiseptic laboratories' and saw this as harmful. My view is that it is impossible just as lack of bias and of personal position is impossible. Yet this does not prevent people and institutions maintaining, often with ferocity, that this is the case. The problem with urban ministry is that, while much of it has been influenced by urban politics and sociology, there has often been little theology in it. However, where serious theology has been done in the urban context, it has never been 'pure theology', but theological engagement with currents in sociology, urban geography, philosophy, medicine, and so on – and particularly with the ups and downs of human life..

A consequence of this shift is the abandonment of the notion that theological enlightenment comes from outside the common life, comes from the intellectual elite, the *illuminati*, those 'in the know', and, only with modifications, filters down to the common people – most of whom, this model assumed, could do without most of it anyway! The democratization of theology is an essential part of its liberation. There are, of course, parallels here with currents in Marxism, some of which have had disastrous results; the notion of the 'vanguard party', who inject enlightenment and the 'correct line' into the passive and receptive masses, a position criticized many years ago by Karl Korsch and later by Rosa Luxemburg, and more recently by socialist feminist thinkers.

There is not time to look in detail at the impact of liberation theology on urban work in Britain. However, three aspects of it – the role of local base communities, the bias to the poor, and the stress on *praxis* – are extremely important. Some of them go back to earlier streams of Christian action, as far back as the mid-19th Century, and many of them were thrashed out in the Victorian cities. I cannot resist pointing out that, although many people believe that *praxis* is a concept which grew from Marx and later from the liberation theologians, it was common in ancient Greek philosophy and in the early church. Jesus tells us that, at the judgment, the Son of Man will reward everyone *kata ten praxin*, according to their *praxis* (Mt 16:37) while Isaac the Syrian in the 7th Century tells us that righteous activity is called *praxis*, and that the word is born out of *praxis* (Isaac 1984: Homilies: 7-8). In other words, *praxis* is not just any form of action but just action, and it *precedes* and does not follow the written or spoken text. It is this ancient idea of just action, rooted in prayer and contemplation, and nurturing theological insight, which has been recovered in recent decades.

So we are back with urban ministry and theology which has been affected, perhaps not always in ways it understands, by these kinds of changes. The central place of *praxis*, of action in tandem with theory, has been central to the best urban ministry for some time, and its centrality was brought out strongly in some words in Stanley Evans's *The Church in the Back Streets* in 1962:

Supremely...there is only one way in which the church in the back streets, as, of course, anywhere else, can proclaim the Gospel effectively, and that is by action. The great mass of people have a very shrewd idea of what Christianity professes; but they have an equally shrewd idea that the practice of the Church in no way corresponds to these professions [...] They are not going to be converted by a church which is not visibly trying to live out its professing. This means more than a practical demonstration that the relationships between people in the Church are on a Christian basis, although that is vital; it means a perpetual

demonstration that the local church is so concerned about the people of the district that it is prepared to take any action that is necessary to help them, and this means everything from street crossings and housing and race relations to hydrogen bombs. No people who are really adult are going to be persuaded to come to church and mutter prayers about the Church Militant when they know well that the one thing the Church fears more than it fears the devil is any kind of militancy. Militancy is not respectable. The Church Respectable can do many things, but it cannot convert (Evans 1962: 35-6)

While the situation in 2006 is vastly different from that of 1962, his words abide.

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