

FOCUS

• THE CHURCH'S CRUSADE

The Church of England's *Faith in the City* report, has broken new ground, not merely commenting on the moral consequences of government policy but openly promoting an alternative.

The report registers the Church's total antipathy to the thrust of government policy on the inner cities, demanding drastic changes to prevent 'more suffering, bitterness and social disintegration'. It demands greater public spending on the very areas this government most vigorously opposes: local government, urban aid and public works. And unlike previous Church reports it pays no lip-service to the validity of the government's long-term objectives.

The source of a Christian critique lies in a theological view of how people should live in society combined with experience of the reality today. The 'bias to the poor' which Christian leaders increasingly emphasise indicates not just giving them a priority but judging the success of any particular policy, overwhelmingly, by its impact upon the poor.

The clergy are often uniquely placed to make these judgements, by virtue of their role in a community. Unlike most professional middle-class groups who work with the poor, the clergy also live alongside them, enjoying pretty similar wages and conditions. And this combination of theology and experience means they do not judge government strategy by the mortgage rate, taxation level or dividend returns as other influential groups are bound to do.

The second feature of this critique arises out of a Christian rediscovery of 'Community'. For centuries the Church was carried along on a tide of individual enterprise. But in the past 50 years Christian apologists have looked back to an older tradition, dominant amongst both the Old Testament Jewish community and the first Christians, which stresses the value of organising society for the collective good.

This knits in with a belief that people are meant to live together, sharing rewards and sacrifices. It underpins the Church's present dismay that those with the least are paying the price for economic change.

It all adds up to an unqualified opposition to the Thatcher strategy. But a report like *Faith in the City* could never have been envisaged by church leaders back in 1979. The Church of England has been highly reluctant to delve into political activity. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie believed that he and the Church had a duty

to speak out about the unacceptable consequences of policy as a spiritual and moral counsellor. But he was adamant that the Church had neither the authority or the ability to pronounce on alternatives which were more 'Christian'.

But Runcie and other leaders became deeply disturbed at the government's aggressive stance, not merely rejecting their spiritual advice but disputing their right to speak at all. They also felt a groundswell of pressure from inner city clergy to do more and, in consequence, agreed to establish the two-year commission with a brief to come up with detailed proposals for action.

The Church has now moved into very difficult territory, facing possible attack from their own largely conservative congregations and the government's economic experts. It is very unlikely it will go further into the battle over an alternative policy. It is far more likely that it will return to the role of a prophet, crying in the wilderness as the 'conscience of the nation'. This more limited role has, however, been extremely effective in the past.

In the 1930s the leadership of the churches repeatedly clashed with the National government, attacking its priorities and highlighting the human tragedy that resulted. On the eve of the 1934 budget the Archbishop of York, William Temple, attacked the proposed tax cuts, calling instead for more generous social payments to the poor.

Temple's proposals were dismissed but the Church had a dramatic and lasting impact on political ideology during this period. Its

powerful appeals for humanity, compassion, justice and equality amounted to nothing less than a moral crusade against the ideological basis of free market political philosophy. Christians were in the forefront of the struggle to make the welfare state and the commitment to full employment a reality.

If, as some on the Left are beginning to think, it is a moral crusade rather than an industrial war which is needed to overcome Thatcherism today, then the role of the Church could yet prove to be decisive.

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