

## **REITH LECTURES 1978: Christianity and the World Order**

**Edward Norman**

### **Lecture 1: The Political Christ**

**TRANSMISSION: 1 November 1978 – Radio 4**

Towards the end of 1975, an impressive assortment of Christians gathered in Nairobi for the fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches, some in the splendours of ethnic dress, and some others in the scarcely less exotic costumes of the various denominations. Their procession at the opening ceremony extended backwards from the Jomo Kenyatta Conference Centre until it curled around the huge statue of Kenyatta himself. It was, altogether, a visible sign in the shifting balance in the numerical centre of Christianity, away from the countries of Europe and North America, and towards the nations of the developing world.

The theme of the gathering, itself expressing the Third World flavour of contemporary international Christianity, was *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*. The main exposition came in a speech from Dr Robert McAfee Brown, professor of world Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Confessing that, as a white, male, bourgeois American, he embodied what he called ‘racism, sexism, classism and imperialism’, and more than adequately apologising for the sins in which this involved him, he lapsed into Spanish, apparently in an attempt to avoid, as he put it, the ‘linguistic imperialism’ of the English tongue. Most of those present reached for their translation headsets. It was a symbolic moment.

What they heard was later described, in the official Church of England report, as ‘a major theological address’. Dr McAfee Brown spoke of Jesus as ‘liberator’, concerned with ‘social, political and economic liberation’. And, after dwelling at some length upon the identification of Christianity with the demands of, as he put it, ‘oppressed peoples’, he went on to say: ‘You may feel that I have not made Jesus political enough, and that I am too conditioned by bourgeois categories to understand the full thrust of liberation.’ It was, in the circumstances, a modest disclaimer.

This incident, in itself typical enough, discloses the most remarkable of all the changes that have occurred within Christianity during the last 20 years. For both individual Christian leaders, and the churches collectively, have undergone a process known to social scientists and historians as politicisation. The nature of this change, and its effects, are the theme of these lectures. Politicisation does not mean mere organised political activity; indeed, some politicised Christians, like those in England, are notable for a very low level of participation in actual political organisation. Politicisation of religion means the internal transformation of the faith itself, so that it comes to be defined in terms of political values; it becomes essentially concerned with social morality rather than with the ethereal qualities of immorality—the temporal supersedes the spiritual.

Christianity today is being reinterpreted as a scheme of social and political action, dependent, it is true, upon supernatural authority for its ultimate claims to attention,

but rendered in categories that are derived from the political theories and practices of contemporary society. There are several versions of this tendency, and there are varying degrees of coherence in the extent to which it is accomplished; but all start from a rejection of preceding Christian attitudes, from a belief that Christians have, in the past, been too concerned with spirituality. Religious engagement with the world was seen to be an affair of charitable palliatives. In its place, contemporary Christians seek a corporate reaction to what are increasingly regarded as collective sins: racism, economic or cultural exploitation, class division, the denial of human rights, and so forth.

This concept is itself a clue to what has happened. Christians are responding sympathetically to the creation of collectivist state structures, and to the secular moral assumptions that sustain their authority. The attitudes of Christians are, therefore, like those of society in general. Some of their present political consciousness is forced upon the churches. The increasing politicisation of all moral values in our society, and the extension of the social competence of government, have prompted the entry of the state into areas which were formerly the traditional preserve of the churches; for example, education, and very many other aspects of social welfare and, indeed, international welfare—such as the expenditure of our taxes on Third World development. These incursions make it very difficult for the church not to become politically involved, for politics has actually moved into the church's sphere.

The present reinterpretation of Christianity, however, goes deeper than those conditions oblige and is, in reality, an expression of the politicisation of the clergy themselves, both personally and as a class. They have allowed themselves—some eagerly, and many others unwittingly—to define their religious values according to the categories and references provided by the compulsive moralism of contemporary intellectual culture.

This is not, of course, the way they see things themselves. They believe they are bringing a Christian critique to bear upon the great problems of the day; that they comprise an external body of ideals. But that is not actually the case, due to the progressive secularisation of the values to which their own understanding of religion is made to correspond. There is a fundamental difference between a Christian knowledge of politics, acquired in order to serve the interests of the church as an institution, and the identification of the content of the faith with human attempts at social improvement. Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty once said, 'I regard politics as a necessary evil in the life of a priest.'

Today's Christianity, however, increasingly regards politics as a primary virtue. It is this development which makes the present association between Christianity and political values unlike past ones. The history of Europe since the conversion of Constantine is a history of Christian involvement with the political order. But, in former experiences of Christian political action, the distinction between the sacred and the secular, between church and state, was much less clearly drawn than it is now. Indeed, the church's past involvements with world order produced just as much a 'sacralising' of politics as it did a politicisation of the faith. Acting from within the structure, in which they occupied a position of confidence and privilege, the clergy did not, in general, adopt the characteristically politicised outlook which they do who operate from outside a system and seek its radical transformation. There is, then, a

clear distinction between the involvement of religion with politics and the reinterpretation of religious values as political values—which is what occurs in the process of politicisation, and is what is happening in the church.

The Christian religion has lost the power, and also the confidence, to define the areas of public debate, even in moral questions. Instead, it follows the definitions made by others. Almost no one now looks to the church for social teaching, though, in the Third World, religion still has a social role. Even the fears of impending global chaos or annihilation do not elicit religious responses, as once the intimations of cataclysm would have done. The contemporary debate about world resources, overpopulation, pollution or nuclear catastrophe is according to the analysis of secular thinkers—although the churches tag along, offering a religious gloss to precisely the same ideas. No one listens, for religion is no longer regarded as a guarantor of stability.

It is important to ask whether Christian influence may be more decisive in those parts of the Third World in which the church is strong; in Africa and South America, especially. It is easy, from the perspective of Western society, not to realise that this is, in fact, a great period of Christian expansion. There are an estimated 55,000 Christian conversions every day throughout the world—a staggering figure by any standards, and the more so when it is set against the decay of the Western churches. But there are Imponderables about future developments. At present, Christianity is closely associated with the buoyant movements for national identity and change in the developing world, but will its role be curtailed by the spread of Western secularisation?

Will the extensive criticism of inherited Western values—in which the church takes a prominent part—have the effect of preparing the ground for the eventual success of Marxism in the Third World, especially now when Marxism seems so often to be the form in which the moral seriousness of the new educated classes expresses itself? And will Marxist political societies necessarily result in the progressive decline of religious institutions? The developing world is characterised by sharply rising expectations as to what can be achieved by social change and political action—and, again, the churches have thrown their influence on to the side of those who encourage this development. But these expectations are really out of all proportion to the opportunities of meeting them, and the long-term consequences of that will surely involve the creation of monolithic controlled societies. Will the churches survive within their own creation? And, despite appearances to the contrary, the ideas that inspire the political consciousness of the developing world's Christianity actually originated in the politicised church of the old world, where Christianity is in radical decay.

Most Third World Christianity is spiritual rather than political, but, everywhere, church leadership tends to consist of Westernised elites who superimpose the liberal and radical political idealism of the Christian thinking of the developed world upon the diffused religiosity around them. The result is an appearance of authenticity: their Westernised political Christianity, as in the ideologies of African nationalism, is mistaken for the voice of the world's oppressed. I shall, in these lectures, illustrate this feature with analyses of the Christian thinking of Latin America and Southern Africa. In their death agonies, the Western churches are distributing the causes of their own sickness—the politicisation of religion—to their healthy offspring in the

developing world. Will it prove a fatal inheritance, or will the vibrant churches of the southern hemisphere become, in the end, sufficiently inventive to produce their own antidotes?

The spread of education is another crucial consideration. There is no doubt that, in developed societies, education has contributed to the decline of religious belief. But there is nothing determined about it. Everything depends upon the values the educators convey. In Victorian Britain, popular education was promoted by a class which was soaked in religious moralism, and the result was the distribution of a reasonably uniform if diluted Christian culture.

Modern educationalists are secular in outlook, but also committed moralists. So their endeavours spread secular morality. The outcome of mass education in the developing world is entirely dependent upon the presuppositions of those who carry it out. There is nothing in the enlightenment of the mind, as such, that leads to scepticism. Religious belief, like other ideals in the modern world, is sustained by elites. If Christianity is dropped from the agenda of the predominant elites, it will, in the course of time, decline.

In the developed Western nations, the politicisation of Christianity is already very advanced. It takes the form of identifying Christian teachings with the moral outlook and political ideals of liberalism. Christians themselves, of course, only believe that they are endorsing agreed moral truths—providing a religious foundation for the higher principles which liberalism promotes. They see such concepts as democratic pluralism, equality, individualist human rights, the freedom to choose values, and so forth, as basic expressions of Christianity, the modern applications of the moral precepts of Christ. But, to an external observer or to non-Liberals, their commitment to these principles looks like ordinary political preference. To Marxists, the fundamental principles of liberalism, together with their religious backing, are merely formalised expressions of class ideology.

Criticisms of capitalism are now the staple matter of much Christian social commentary—but criticisms which leave the basis of the social system undisturbed, appear at best trivial, at worst hypocritical. To those who are sceptical of all versions of Christian politics, including conservative ones—and this is my own position—the present identification of Christianity with Western bourgeois liberalism seems an unnecessary consecration of a highly relative and unstable set of values, the more unsatisfactory because it is generally done unconsciously.

Liberalism actually occupies a very narrow band in the possible spectrum of political theories. To regard it as the distillation of Christian wisdom, as the contemporary repository of a timeless faith, is, to say the least, a short-term view. But, related by class and cultural preference to the educated elites whose endorsement of liberal values they so faithfully reproduce, the leaders of the Western churches seem completely unaware of how partial their political vision actually is. It may well be, of course, that liberalism is perfectly acceptable, for all kinds of political and moral reasons: my contention is simply that there are no distinctly Christian reasons for regarding its principles as more compatible with the teachings of Christ than other political outlooks. Church leaders seem unaware of the problem.

Let me give an example. In November last year, during the press conference to announce a Church of England report on the closed shop in industry, the Bishop of Worcester described ‘tolerant attitudes, flexibility, and compassion’ as ‘the Christian virtues which have got to be transfused into society.’

Now ‘tolerance’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘compassion’ are not distinctively Christian virtues, though two of them are arguably classical pagan ones, nor does an examination of the history of Christianity suggest that the church is the most suitable agency to secure their application. And, anyway, whatever the pedigree of these concepts, the fact is that their real virtue is entirely dependent upon the ideas to which they are made to relate; and that is something which alters according to circumstance and the general prescriptions of the prevailing ideology. The bishop’s patronage of these qualities turns out to be sponsorship of the content of contemporary liberalism.

Here is another example. At the Caxton Hall conference on religious education, in February, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked: ‘Do we want to indoctrinate children into our own beliefs?’ He answered: ‘God forbid.’ There was, he said, a need instead to introduce children to a discussion ‘of religion.’

What the archbishop’s words actually convey is approval of the contemporary liberal belief that society should consist of a balanced pluralism of moral opinion, and that people should be free to select their own values. This scheme of things is so frequently expressed, and so unquestioningly accepted within the Western liberal intelligentsia, that its advocates are innocently unaware of just how politically partial it is.

Some pretence is also involved, because liberals certainly believe in the indoctrination of their own liberalism. On such issues as race or educational equalitarianism Western liberals are clearly not prepared to allow public debate to go undirected. No one who really believes in his values leaves their acceptance to chance, particularly when it comes to children. Marxists do not; nor should Christians—whose business is indoctrination, if it is anything. And, in practice, Christians are found calling for the enforcement of ideas. But it is not religious ideas that the state is to propagate—for that is regarded by them as illiberal. It is the components of the contemporary liberal creed, the virtues of social democracy that they wish to see enforced.

This year’s Lambeth Conference of the bishops of the Anglican Communion was richly imbued with Christian endorsements of liberal idealism. Beginning with the unlikely spectacle of the bishops processing into Canterbury Cathedral to the accompaniment of *The Groovers* steel band—apparently intended to evoke the spirit of the Third World—the tone of the conference was set by two ‘special lectures’ delivered in the opening days. Both were full of moralistic criticism of Western capitalism and of the present application of technology by the developed nations. Both were extremely partial, reducing highly technical information to simple dismissals of alternative viewpoints—treating the governments of the Western world, and the great weight of scientific and technical opinion, as if they were childishly ignorant of practical as well as moral considerations. The bishops were lyrical in their approval.

The lecture by Barbara Ward—which the Archbishop of Canterbury later described as ‘wonderful’ - vilified ‘colonialism’, referred approvingly to China’s economic priorities, and contended for ‘small-scale’ technology, in a sort of updated arts-and-crafts vision. The world’s energy problem was to be met with solar panels—which had the additional advantage, according to Barbara Ward, of favouring the underdeveloped countries, because that is where the sunshine is.

The second lecturer was Professor Charles Elliott, an adviser for some years to President Kaunda of Zambia. Present civilisation was ‘rotten’, he said. ‘Prophetic action’ was needed, to end what he called ‘the sin in the structures’ of society. Technology had to be ‘socially useful’ to justify itself: he condemned the development of Concorde. To the assembled prelates it seemed as if the voice of truth was calling them to grapple with the real problems of the secular world. It was left to an Orthodox archbishop, the Metropolitan Antony, to remind them that ‘what we call *secular* would in the past have been called *pagan*’.

It was the conflation of Christian morality and humanist ethics, made by so many theologians and church leaders during the 1960s, that decisively secularised important aspects of Christianity, though other causes had been at work before that. This contributed also to its politicisation; for humanists seek to add to the competence of the political sphere by incorporating their moral beliefs about social welfare, and so on, into law. They demonstrate the modern tendency to regard all values as political values. Even in areas where their ideals ostensibly require less state activity, as in the humanist call for sexual conduct to be freed from legislative interference—a call, incidentally, generally welcomed by Christian leaders on liberal grounds—even in such areas, the experience of organisation and agitation for reform is itself profoundly politicising in its effects. The view of human nature expressed by humanism is in direct contradiction to received religious attitudes, as humanists themselves have always insisted. The 1960s crisis of values within the Western intelligentsia ought to have elicited a clear polarisation between religious and secular attitudes on such fundamental matters as the doctrine of man.

In practice, this did not happen, and at least part of the explanation is to be found in the willingness of Christian thinkers to adopt the same moral and intellectual outlook as the humanists. Humanists, for their part, adopted none of the premises of Christianity. But their view of man as morally autonomous and capable of progressive development, and the calculated hedonism of humanist ethics, penetrated far into Christian attitudes during the 1960s, so that, eventually, even the most broad and liberal of the bishops started describing themselves as ‘Christian humanists’—and not, I should add, in the tradition of Erasmus, but in deference to the secular luminaries of the time. What Ivan Illich called a ‘radical secularisation’ of the whole structure of institutional Christianity was regarded by some as a necessary consequence of the Christian discovery of the ideals inherent in contemporary moral seriousness. Some others were less impressed. Speaking in the cathedral of Bogota, during his visit to Colombia in 1968, Pope Paul said: ‘The gap left in our schools of philosophy by this loss of confidence in the great masters of Christian thought, has, all too often, been filled by a superficial and almost servile acceptance of the currently fashionable philosophies.’

The evaporation of any sense that religious tradition conveys a unique understanding of human life has been one of the most decisive changes in modern Christian experience. Instead of modifying or rejecting secular culture, the most influential of Christian thinkers have adopted it. The whole emphasis of contemporary Christianity eschews traditional doctrinal priorities, and is about applications. The church is increasingly preoccupied with the pursuit of a more just society, and with the material problems of humanity. Secular programmes for human improvement seem more important, as practical if unconscious expressions of God's love, than does the cultivation of correct religious belief. This attitude has been criticised by the new pope, John Paul H. Speaking in his Lenten addresses two years ago, the pope observed that those who denounced religion as the 'opium of the people' sometimes claimed—as he put it—to be 'on the side of Lazarus against the rich man and, hence, on the same side as Christ himself'. This claim the pope rejects. Secular programmes for human improvement are not the essence of Christianity. The trouble, the pope suggested, is that people try to 'mould' Christ—as he said— 'to their own dimensions', representing him as a contemporary man of progress, identifiable with secular moral concern.

Churchmen are, as it happens, rather selective in this, preferring to see the divine energy revealed in regimes that are not right-wing. Thus China, whose denial of the most basic human rights ought to attract the condemnation of those Christians whose liberalism is the most developed, is, in practice, often treated to positively fulsome praise.

The accompanying readiness to identify with the social objectives of a rival ideology indicates a real loss of confidence in the traditional claims of Christianity. It is a further acceptance of material tests as the criteria for moral worth. Christianity has an extraordinary propensity to regard its own replacements with benign approval.

This is not to say that the actual social and political ideals adopted by Christians are, in themselves, untrue or are not in correspondence with a legitimate understanding of the faith. It is, however, to suggest that they are far too relative to be regarded as central in the definition of Christianity itself. And it is certainly to look to the practical consequences. What will happen to Christianity as its content is drained away into the great pool of secular idealism? It is to ask whether Christianity will not identify itself so closely with secular ideas that its fate will be inseparable from theirs.

My lectures will not be greatly concerned with the technical arguments to be found in the theological reinterpretations which are required to represent Christianity as a scheme of secular redemption. They will not primarily be an examination of what are called 'political theology', 'liberation theology' and 'black theology': systematic explanations of politicised religious values. I shall be concerned much more with the immediate motivations of Christian involvement with political issues. Since the exponents of political theology themselves declare that their intentions are activist rather than theoretical, they would perhaps agree that this is a reasonable procedure. I hope to isolate the political ideas used both consciously and unconsciously by contemporary Christians; I hope to identify them, and to set them in the general context of political thinking and practice in the modern world.

In the largest perspective, I shall see the politicisation of Christianity as a symptom of its decay as an authentic religion. It is losing sight of its own rootedness in a spiritual tradition; its mind is progressively secularised; its expectations are prompted by worldly changes; and its moral idealism has forfeited transcendence. The prospects are not happy ones.

The present decline of Christianity in the developed world, furthermore, is not the consequence of successful assault by its enemies. It is due to the surrender of its unique claims to an understanding of the nature of men made by its own leaders. The churches have responded to secularisation by giving up their own forms and procedures in order to accommodate the new social attitudes. Fortunately, truth does not cease because people give up believing it. In fact, Christianity's decline in the developed countries confirms the view of human nature the church itself once taught.

Christianity was once about human fallibility, about the worthlessness of all earthly expectations. Now it is seemingly preoccupied with human capabilities. It is this very great change that I shall try to describe in the next five lectures.