PRAYER AND PROPHECY

Some Reflections
on the British Urban Scene

by

Kenneth Leech

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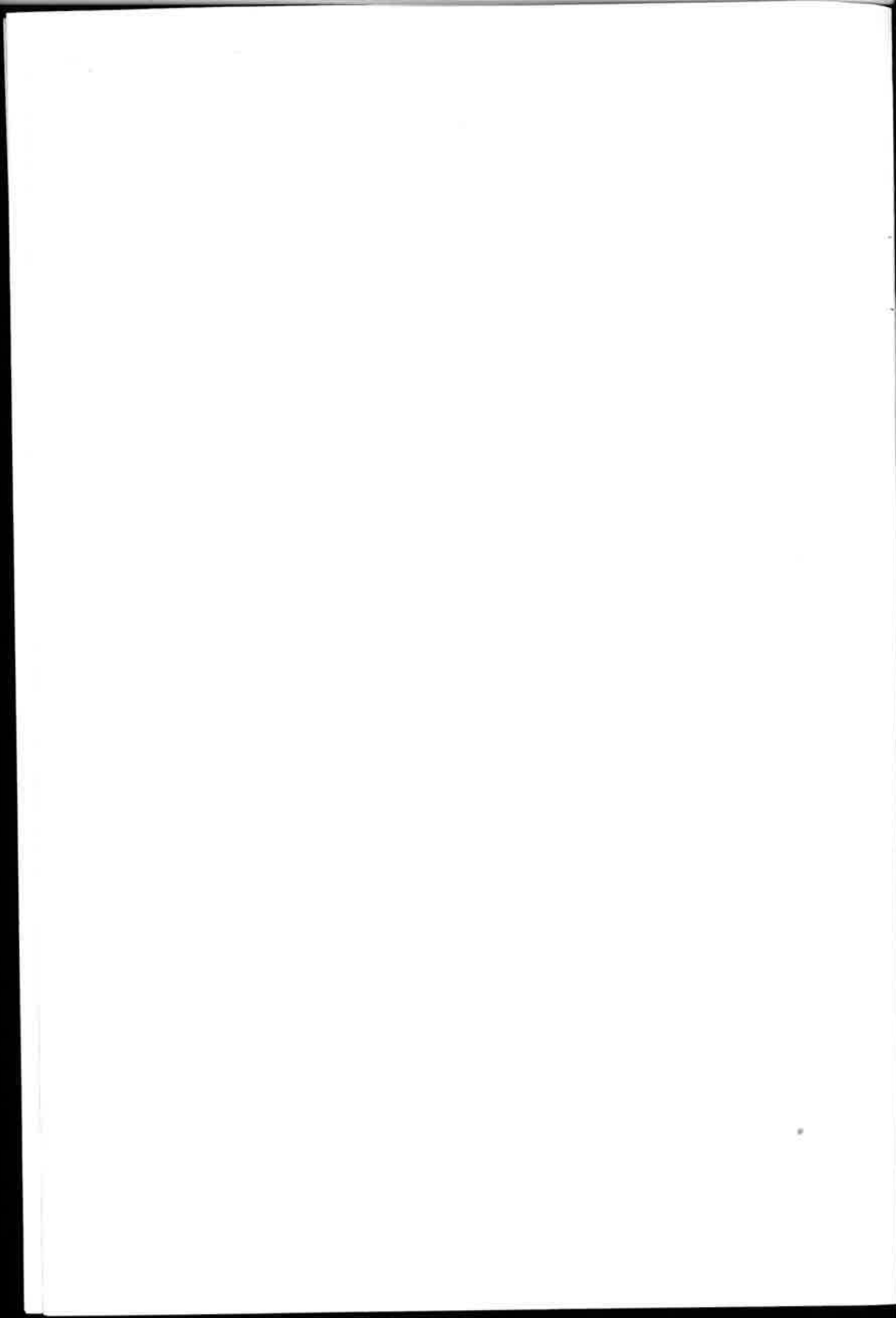### on the British Urban Scene

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The Archbishop of Canterbury has set up a Commission on Urban Priority Areas. Recently its members visited the economically depressed town of North Shields in the northeast of England. One member, visiting a primary school, asked a small boy to tell him what was his most pressing current problem. "Thieving," the boy responded without hesitation. "Who steals from you?" asked the commission member, to which "Jimmy Robinson" was the instant reply. "Ah, yes," replied the embarrassed cleric. "I didn't want any actual names. I just wondered who it was in general."

I want, in these two lectures, to avoid the temptation to generalise, and to speak, as specifically and accurately as I can, about the British urban scene; and in that context to reflect theologically and pastorally on the role of the Church in the inner city. I intend to take the British, and in particular the London, experience of the Church as the basis for looking at inner urban ministry as a whole; and I will leave the American audience to make connections with their own situation in city or suburb. There are both significant lessons to be learned, and also simplistic comparisons to be avoided, in dialogue between British and American cities and churches. In the framework provided by the city and the presence of the Christian community within it, I want to reflect in particular on two areas of theological pressure: the pressure to nourish resources of contemplative prayer; and the pressure to witness prophetically against structures of evil as manifested in the urban context.

My own background is entirely urban. I was born in Manchester as World War II began. My parents were both victims of the decline of the Lancashire cotton industry and of the poverty arising from low pay and unemployment in the 1930s and later. Ours was a working class district where church-going followed class lines for the most part: the middle class and aspiring working class might be Anglican; the Methodists would attract some

sections of the working class and at times was a significant force within the labour movement; the Roman church was an integral part of the culture of the Irish, but not the English, working class; some mission halls attracted the poor; while most working people stayed away from all the churches. My family, and most of my street, came into the last category. I began to take Christianity seriously in mid-teens and worshipped in a back street Anglo-Catholic church, a product of the Oxford Movement and its mission to the cities.

In 1958 I left the north of England and moved to London as a student. There I lived in the East End, in the Whitechapel area. My parish priest, Father Joe Williamson, had made a name for himself for his work with prostitutes in the London Docks area, and for his campaign for slum clearance in the neighbourhood. I lived for three years in a Franciscan mission in Cable Street, a former brothel, where the team were very much influenced by the early work in New York City, in the East Harlem Protestant Parish and at St. Augustine's, Lower East Side. From Whitechapel I moved to Shoreditch, and then to Soho in the West End, and for six years I was Rector of Bethnal Green. The parish to which I am now attached is in Notting Dale, a working class multi-racial community in an area of high unemployment and poverty, but very close to an extremely wealthy and fashionable neighbourhood.

I am therefore an urban creature, with little experience of work in the countryside or in the affluent suburbs (though much of my present work as a field officer for the Church's Board for Social Responsibility takes me to both.) I want therefore to draw upon my own experience in looking, first, at the place of the Church in British urban life.

One of the people responsible for the present Archbishop's Commission is a priest called Eric James who, for many years, has been preoccupied with the flight of the Church from the inner city. In 1968 Eric James wrote:

> In all honesty I have to say that I hardly know one archbishop or diocesan bishop in the Church of England who seems really to know and understand the realities of our urban industrial situation,

or is willing, with anything like the urgency that is required, to lead his diocese towards the radical action the situation demands.

In fact, neither the bishops nor most of the clergy have, historically, been at home in the urban environment. Although, as we are often told, the Christian church began as an urban movement (to such an extent that "pagan" was a term for country people, and "heathen" for people of the heath!) and as a movement of pilgrims seeking the City of God, in fact, as far as England is concerned, the Church was shaped by and for an agrarian society. To this day the parish system followed by the Church of England is that conceived by Theodore of Tarsus in the 7th Century: a system based on agrarian acreage. With the exception of some medieval churches, and some which were built in the reign of Queen Anne in the early 18th Century, there was virtually no church building in the urban areas until long after the new industrial towns and the inner city communities of the older cities had been well established.

The inner city church, the "church in the back streets" as the late Canon Stanley Evans called it, was thus an after-thought of the Industrial Revolution. The East End of London is a good example. Throughout the early middle ages, the whole area was part of the parish of Stepney. Bethnal Green was created in 1743 as a separate parish, and others—Spitalfields, Poplar, and St George's-in-the-East—were also products of the 18th century. There was no further church building until the middle years of the 19th century when Bishop Blomfield initiated an epidemic of church building, establishing ten churches and parishes in Bethnal Green in ten years. In the urban areas as a whole, six hundred new churches were built between 1824 and 1880. But the Church came into a culture to which it was essentially alien, and which had learned to cope without it. There is a famous conversation which took place between Archbishop Longley (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1862–8) and prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. "The Church", lamented the archbishop, "has lost the towns." "Your grace is mistaken", replied Disraeli, "The Church never had the towns." There is no lack of documentation of, or testimony to, the alienation of the industrial working class from the

Church in the 19th Century. Engels noted it, as, later, did Charles Booth, Mudie-Smith and a succession of researchers. The bigger the towns were, the less religious their populations seemed to be. But churchgoing, where it occurred, was highly correlated with social class. Thus in London in 1851, the highest rates of regular church attendance were in Hampstead (69.2 per cent), the lowest in Shoreditch (18.5 per cent). The previous year F. D. Maurice had commented that "the great body of Englishmen is becoming utterly indifferent to us all."

At the end of the 19th century, the major survey by Charles Booth on *Life and Labour of the People in London*, confirmed what all of those close to the inner city parishes knew: that the vast mass of the working class was outside all the churches, and only marginally affected by organised religion. The Bishop of Stepney's comment in 1879 that "the Church is nowhere in East London" was to be echoed by his successor nearly a century later in a study published in 1974. South of the river the story was the same. "The Church is not in possession in South London," a local newspaper observed in 1888.

This is not, of course, to deny the important work, both pastoral and campaigning activity, undertaken by the churches in this period. Out of the East End of London came the Salvation Army. Here too the "ritualist slum priests" such as Lowder and Wainwright earned the devotion of thousands and became legendary figures in the London Docks. Here too the Christian Socialists such as Stewart Headlam, Charles Marson, and later John Groser, ministered and prophesied. After the publication in 1883 of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, the Methodist Church began its pioneering work at the East End Mission which continues to this day. The list is endless, and it could be repeated for other cities and towns. But the central point I wish to make is that, in spite of all this work and witness, the Church in general, and the Church of England in particular, remained alien to the life of working people. That alienation persists to this day, and no pastoral strategy which refuses to face this reality can possibly succeed.

Towards the end of the century came the university settlements: Oxford, Cambridge, Eton College, Cheltenham Ladies'

College, and many others set up missions to the poor. Most of them survive to this day. They presented in a very clear form a phenomenon which was present and dominant in all the Church's work: the phenomenon of the Church condescending. To say this is not to disparage the good work done, or to impugn the motives of the people. But the ethos was essentially patronising: it was ministry *by* the Church *to* the poor. As a clergyman called Fry put it in 1898:

> The church is mostly administered and officered by the classes; her influential laity belong almost wholly to the class; she is doing a great and growing work among the masses; but the deep sympathies of the clergy with the poor are largely obscured in the eyes of the masses by the fact that social rank and social position secured by wealth and tradition still count for so much in her service, both among clergy and laity.

He could have written those words today. The settlement mentality is not dead though it suffered a severe blow in the 1960s. In 1965 the Reverend Nicholas Stacey, Rector of Woolwich in South London, announced, in a blaze of publicity, "a mission's failure". Why had we failed, Stacey asked in a national newspaper colour supplement. He had all the best material available: one pastor was educated at Winchester (a high class private school), and had been a Cambridge "blue"; another had won a top scholarship from Eton to Trinity College, Oxford! Stacey himself, an ex-Olympic athlete, had introduced all the modern techniques at his disposal. He had even pushed a beauty queen through the streets to gain publicity. But the working class did not come. Stacey was baffled. It was, Canon Stanley Evans commented drily, the last fling of the Church condescending.

However, as the Church was moving into the inner city in the mid-19th Century, the population was moving out. The movement of population from London began in the middle years of the century. Today the population of inner London is the lowest it has been in post-industrial urban history. The process of dispersal was accelerated by World War II, and promoted by town planning policies from 1943 onwards, inspired by the philosophy of "green belt" and the commitment to dispersal. Thus between 1931

and 1959, the urban diocese of London (Anglican) declined in population by 4.3 per cent, Southwark by 5.8 and Manchester by 4.5, while the suburban dioceses of St. Albans, Guildford and Oxford increased by 82.8, 65.4, and 56.9 per cent respectively. Since then every British city has declined, while the suburban periphery has expanded, leaving behind those groups who cannot get out—the old, the poor, the low paid, the new immigrants, and so on.

This outward movement from city to suburb has left its mark on the Church. To some extent, the alienation of working people from the Church has been transplanted from city to suburb. While some have taken on churchgoing as part of the paraphernalia of class upward mobility, this does not seem to have occurred in general in Britain. Organised religion flourishes among the middle class in suburb and countryside, not among the suburban or rural workforce. However, the "suburban captivity" of the churches has meant that "success" in numerical terms can easily obscure the general irrelevance of the Church to suburban life in a way which, for economic reasons, is difficult to deny in the inner urban areas. In suburbia, the Church can survive and even flourish as a club alongside other clubs. Yet its "success" is dependent not only on its willingness to accept this status, but also on its acceptance of a role of providing comfort and support for conformity. Success, in other words, goes hand in hand with reinforcement of the suburban culture. Religion becomes part of the fabric of civic life, a source of comfort rather than of transformation.

I do not apologise for this long, yet still superficial, excursion into English history, because it is impossible to make sense of our present crisis without this historical background. The pioneers of urban sprawl, the 19th Century anti-urbanists, wished to break up the large cities, and so maintain existing class divisions by confining the poor to the inner areas and encouraging the dispersal of the affluent. The Church, as an integral part of the class structure, flourished in suburbia where the middle class grew up: it was never at home in the urban cores. There its role was that of bringing its own middle class—and, in the case of the Church of England, upper class—values to civilise the poor, to maintain order and stability, to prevent disorder and riot. And so, however devoted the pastors, however dedicated the faithful laity,

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the mass of working people have continued to view the Church as allied with privilege, wealth and power. The Church, however, has continued to see its "failure" in the inner city not in class terms, but in terms of an imperfect concept of mission, outdated methods of organisation, or lack of spirituality; or has attributed it to the defects or sins of the working class. What is wrong with these people that they resist the church's mission?

I want now to suggest that the precarious location of the Church in the inner city has been a point of revelation, of disclosure, of a reality which is still observed or denied in other parts of Britain: the reality that the Constantinian era, the era of a Church-state marriage, is at an end. But it is dying more slowly in some places than in others. So Karl Rahner in *The Shape of the Church to Come* (1974), spoke of the present time as a transitional one in which the Church was moving from its older position as a people's Church to its new position as a dissociated, gathered, critical community within a secular state. In Britain, there are many attempts to deny this reality. Many churches seek to carry on as if they were still the "national church", and, in the last few years, there have been strong attempts within the Conservative government to reassert this view. The fundamental issue in the controversies over *The Church and the Bomb* (a report from the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility), the Falkland Islands war, and, more recently, the miners' strike, was not to do with nuclear disarmament, just wars, or uneconomic pits: it was to do with the role of the Church *vis a vis* state and nation. Many bishops, in their public utterances, see themselves as addressing the nation as spokesmen of the national church (as they are in law) rather than as spokesmen of a minority among minorities (as they are in fact). The present Archbishop of York, John Habgood, sees the Church as the focus of national unity and cohesion. But in the inner city, this myth is exposed and unmasked as illusory. It is impossible to pretend otherwise. So the inner city is a point of revelation, disclosing a reality from which other parts of Britain are still able to avert their eyes. But their ability to do so cannot last indefinitely.

If this is true, if the era of Constantine and of Christendom is over, is the Church prepared for, equipped for, the post-Con-

stantinian age, which some have called the "post-Christian age"? My general impression is that it is not. The hierarchy of the churches, their bureaucracies and strategists, have not, on the whole, faced this reality. In the case of the Church of England, the whole structure is geared to preventing them from so doing. The social class background from which bishops and General Synod members are recruited is that of the upper middle class, the public schools, and "Oxbridge", a background which in no way reflects the nation as a whole or the composition of the Church itself. When ordinands from a working class background are accepted for ordination, they are initiated into a clerical club which effectively cuts them off from their own roots. If they are black—and few of them are—the situation is much worse. For in the inner city, black Anglicans outnumber whites in many areas (for reasons which have their origins in the history of colonialism in the Caribbean), but the power structure remains in the hands of the white minority. But the position of black Anglicans merely highlights the position which historically has been that of the white working class. So we find middle class students being prepared in seminary for situations of which their teachers have little knowledge or experience. A recent submission on urban training concludes that theological colleges have "positively unfitted them for the inner urban ministry". Yet even where the seminary has shown some insight and awareness, the new pastor is often thrust into a structure which disables and frustrates his or her ministry: vast buildings which overawe and impress but do not welcome, houses which speak of privilege in the midst of poverty, and all the inherited cultural baggage of the Church as by law established.

The question of buildings is a difficult one. On the one hand, the inner city is filled with edifices built for a previous age which cannot be maintained by aging and poor parishioners. Moreover they often symbolise power and wealth in areas of deprivation. On the other hand, to pull down these buildings in the present climate is often to add yet another act of robbery to a population increasingly deprived of schools, hospitals, shops, and always devoid of power. Church buildings are rarely closed in suburbia; in the inner city, their closure often symbolises to an increasingly

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despondent population that the Church doesn't care about them either. A Church which once put too much of its faith and energy into buildings and too little into nurturing an indigenous church is now facing the consequences of its own history.

At the heart of the pastoral crisis in Britain's cities is an obsolete model of the pastoral unit. Here I want to refer to the research done by David Wasdell of the Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (formerly the Urban Church Project). Wasdell has shown that churches in an urban parish neighbourhood of over 2,000 population do not grow much beyond 65 worshipping members, irrespective of population increase. This led him to ask: is the low growth rate due to internal constraints? He concluded that churches in urban areas were working with a self-limiting model. The parish system, in which a holy man located in a building ministered to a neighbourhood, was a system developed in an agricultural economy. The parish was based not on population size but on territory. This rural model was later translated into the urban context where it conspicuously failed, and from there the failure has been exported round the world. "Tragically", comments Wasdell, "western churches exported that model worldwide, and similar patterns of Christian collapse have been repeated in city after city."

So the inner city church, seeking to operate a rural model in the urban context, outgrows the resources necessary for its own sustenance. The harder one pushes, the less it moves, for it has reached the limit of human relationship starvation. I will return to Wasdell's thesis later. His diagnosis of the Church's failure seems to me, although a partial explanation, to be substantially correct. Churches which seek to relate to their neighbourhood, on this model, simply cannot grow beyond a certain point: they become overloaded and undernourished, and so turn in upon themselves, defending their security against the city and its people.

How then has the Church responded to the urban scene? Let me point to four types of response.

First, many have simply abandoned the inner city altogether as a "failure area", and have focused upon the suburbs where the quest for property and privacy seems more conducive to a reli-

gion of stability and inwardness. This has gone hand in hand with the unwillingness of many pastors and their families to stay in the inner areas for more than a few years, and with the growth, in recent years, of a new type of private spirituality in which religion comes to be concerned only with the condition of the inward soul. And undoubtedly such a religion goes down well in many suburban areas where churchgoing is respectable and religion is essentially private. But is "success" in suburbia really success in gospel terms? If all that is happening there is the provision of comfort, if the church in suburbia merely serves to sanctify and strengthen the complacency of suburban Christians, and to deepen the chasm between them and the urban poor, how is that success? If the Church in suburbia has become a means not towards the Kingdom of God but towards its own preservation, how is that success?

Undoubtedly the "market view" of church growth has left its mark. If there is no market for your product in the East End of London, then migrate to Essex. If the Church's role is simply to flourish, and the neighbourhood is merely a neutral backdrop, then, in William Empson's words, "it seemed the best thing to up and go." So in Newham, the last eastward fringe of inner London, over half the churches have closed since 1950. Eight closed in 1974 alone. In East London as a whole, over half the churches have closed since 1945—in one of the most deprived and troubled regions of Britain.

A second kind of response has been to adopt what is now called a "preferential option for the poor" or a "bias to the poor". There is a long history to such a strategy in English Christianity. Leonardo Boff's claim that Christ possesses a "sacramental density" among the poor can be found, expressed in near identical terms, in the sermons of E. B. Pusey who inspired the "slum priests" of the Oxford Movement in the 19th Century. "Reverence the poor as ye would reverence Christ", Pusey urged. The poor were "the church's special treasure". In the same period, F. W. Faber, author of *Growth in Holiness* and *The Ideal of a Christian Church*, saw the Church as an advocate for the poor. The commitment to the poor, and to a lifestyle in solidarity with

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the poor, can show many noble and moving examples. Saintly pastors like Lincoln Wainwright and John Groser who ministered in the same mean streets for nearly half a century. Communities such as the Simon Community, formed in 1963 and very much modelled on the Catholic Worker movement, which runs houses of hospitality for the vagrant and derelict communities. There is a great deal of this work in Britain as there is in the United States. But it often has two fatal weaknesses. First, it is not the derelict, the *lumpen* (to use Marx's contemptuous term), who are beyond the reach of the Church. Churches in Britain have always attracted, and ministered to, these groups. The alienation is from the working class, and it is possible to minister *to* the poor in a way which does nothing to overcome this historic gulf. Second, the Church speaks a lot about its "bias to the poor", but working people see that its true bias is to the rich and powerful who support it and call its tune. This can set a Church against itself as in the case of Holy Trinity, Paddington in West London, where the biggest black youth project as well as important church work with the homeless is threatened by the diocese's proposal to sell the site for development to the highest bidder.

It is all too easy for the Church to accept the role of a gap-filling agency. Since the present regime came to power in Britain, there has been a terrifying increase in the numbers of people living on or below the poverty line. Around 15 million people fall into this category at present. I shall refer more to this in the second lecture. But the pressure on churches and charities to return to a pastoral model of soup kitchen, food pantry and Victorian philanthropy is very great. The Church's duty, according to the prevailing wisdom, is to care for the poor; the government's role is to create them. So the Church assumes the role of servant, of counsellor, of minister to the broken and non-coping, of crisis intervention. Suburban churches and those in the better off parts of town will often support such ministries as a way of keeping the poor at a distance.

In no way do I want to suggest that such casualty caring is to be deplored. I have spent a lot of my ministry doing it, and no doubt will continue to do so. What I am suggesting is that it is

not an adequate model for the Church's work in the urban context, and that a dominant emphasis on such ministry can actually make the task of social change more difficult.

Third, and more hopefully, we have seen in recent years, as you have in the United States, a significant shift in theological consciousness among some Roman Catholics and some evangelical Christians. There are in fact close parallels with the American experience: the increasing role of Christians in the peace movement; the influence of groups such as Pax Christi, and of individuals such as Henri Nouwen, Jim Wallis, Ronald Sider and others; the coming together, across confessional boundaries, of Christians working in urban neighbourhoods. Increasingly in the inner areas of British cities, Christians from different historic traditions are finding a theological and pastoral consensus. Increasingly the real gap is not between the denominations, but between the churches in the inner city and those in the affluent suburban areas. Central to the changes in both Catholic and evangelical approaches has been the sense that work for social justice is a constitutive element in the proclamation of the Gospel; and the quest for a spirituality which will nourish this unified vision. In England, the Roman church, which has traditionally played no social role in English political life (as opposed to Irish), and which has been a migrant church, has, under Cardinal Hume, come to speak, with increasing force, on national and international issues. Among evangelicals (most of whom are Anglicans or Baptists), the influence of David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, and of such groups as the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, have been of great importance. No longer can it be assumed that Rome simply ministers to the Irish, or that evangelicals are all individualist, otherworldly and right wing.

Fourth, we are seeing the movement which has become known as "base communities". The attempt to translate a pastoral concept from Latin America to an entirely different context has rightly been criticised. Nevertheless, western Christianity has seen an explosion of small communities, some of them elitist and inward-looking, others seeking to live out their discipleship in witness and service. What we have seen is a new sense of the place of the small committed group or cell in Christian mission and pastoral

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care. I return here to the work of David Wasdell. Wasdell's critique of the self-limiting church, the church which has ceased to grow, the church on the plateau, is based on the belief that primary groups saturate at 12 and secondary groups around 65. The Church has focussed in its pastoral mission on secondary groups, on growth by addition. But, Wasdell claims, churches should focus instead on the building up of primary groups, with the congregation as a cluster of such groups. Thus he suggests growth by multiplication instead of growth by addition, and a network model of pastoral care instead of a radial model. The explosion of little congregations is one of the most important factors in renewal. It is of fundamental importance in the urban areas where often community has broken down, and where the creation of cells of deep belonging can be far more valuable than a congregation in which community cannot grow. The future of the Church in the urban areas is, I believe, intimately bound up with this recovery of the small group—a point which was emphasised as long ago as 1956 by Martin Thornton in his *Pastoral Theology: A Reorientation*.

Finally I want to suggest that the urban scene as I have experienced it presents many of the features and challenges which were experienced by an earlier generation of Christians in the desert. The association of desert and city is not original. The deserts of Egypt and Syria, in which the early monastic movement grew, has been described as a city. But today it is in the city that we encounter most powerfully the realities of wasteland and of wilderness. It is in the city that we are confronted by the classic challenges of the desert tradition: the challenge to gospel purity in face of compromise, the challenge to find one's own identity in community, the challenge to clarity of vision in face of temptations to idolatry, the challenge to struggle and conflict with the forces of evil. All these desert challenges confront us in the modern city. Essentially the movement to the desert in the early Christian centuries was a quest for authenticity, for identity, for solidarity, for vision, for victory over evil. In the desert the monks created an alternative culture which made the desert blossom. As the era of Constantine began, it was the desert fathers who maintained the life of discipleship and the quest for the vision of God.

Contemplative communal spirituality was born out of the desert experience.

Now the significant fact to which I wish to draw attention was expressed towards the end of the 1950s by the Jesuit Jean Daniélou. He wrote:

> The Constantinian phase in Christian history is coming to an end. . . . The flight into the desert was a revolutionary innovation, dating from the fourth century when St. Antony inaugurated the age of monks, the withdrawal of the contemplatives from a world in which Christianity was compromised into the solitudes where they might keep alive the faith of the martyrs. That age is passing—St. Antony is coming back from his desert.

St. Antony is coming back from his desert. A quarter of a century after Daniélou wrote those words, we can recognise their prophetic insight. Today the contemplatives are coming back from the desert to the cities, and the desert life of prayer and struggle is being sought in the urban wasteland. Here men and women find themselves pushed to the margins of social life, here they experience hunger, weakness, danger, the need for support and nourishment.

I have suggested that the Constantinian era is at an end, and that the inner city experience exposes to our vision the truth that the Church is once again a minority group within a pagan society. The recognition of that truth must lead us to a re-evaluation of much of our theology and pastoral assumptions. But recognition depends upon vision, and calls for a reflective, contemplative, listening posture. Without that posture, the city can crush us, confuse us, overwhelm us with messages and signals which we cannot fathom. Hence the urgent pastoral need for inner city contemplatives. I am not suggesting anything very grand or rarified: simply that the Church in the urban areas needs to recover its ability to see: to see God at work in the back streets and among the poor and lowly; to see and to resist evil; to see and to unmask illusion and falsehood; to see more clearly our own way forward. Radical action can only begin with radical contemplation. The desert is the place of discernment, and discernment comes from attention to the skies and to the neglected voices of the streets. A

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Church which is obsessively concerned with caring is a Church which has lost the ability to see. One could say of such churches, as R. H. Tawney once said of the Fabians: "They tidy the room, but they open no windows in the soul."

I believe that the renewal of contemplative listening and contemplative community is a necessary prerequisite for social criticism and for prophecy. The church in the back streets needs to be a praying, sensitive, listening church. It needs to listen particularly to the voices of the unheard and the inarticulate. It needs therefore to cultivate qualities of spirit which are precisely opposed to those which make for success in activist terms, qualities which enable hidden truths to be perceived and neglected voices to be heard. It needs to become a vulnerable church, a church which recognises that often it can do nothing and must accept its powerlessness. Austin Smith, a Passionist priest and author of *Passion for the Inner City,* lives in a small flat in Liverpool 8, the district known since the riots of 1981 as Toxteth. In a recent article he relates that, during the rioting, he returned from the violence and destruction of the streets and re-read St. John of the Cross on the dark night of the soul. It came alive in that context of urban violence as it had not done before: the call to abide in the darkness and confusion, not knowing or seeing clearly, but trusting that somehow God was at work in the midst of the upheaval.

I think back to those riots in Brixton, Moss Side, Liverpool and Bristol. All the streets and parishes are well known to me, many of the pastors of the churches there are close friends. My own parish in Bethnal Green had experienced several months of organised racist violence in 1978. And we all asked: where was God in the upheaval? To discern the signs of the times surely means being able to recognise the face of the wounded and stricken Christ in the victims of injustice and despair, and to recognise sometimes in fear and trembling, the working out of God's salvation in the midst of violence and upheaval. An American Roman Catholic document *Hear the Cry of Jerusalem,* was published in 1980. It spoke of the city as a desert, and of the need for the church to listen to the voices of the city. For, it wrote:

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It is here, at the core, that the strength or weakness of a society is most accurately measured. It is here, at the core, where evil must have its antidote or unnumbered human souls are sacrificed. It is here, at the core, that one discovers that history is created if not by the spiritually mature, then by the spiritually deformed and degenerate. It is here, at the core, where prayerful hands become clenched, and the presence of God is most discernible in rage.

The city, like the desert, is the scene of struggle, of murmuring and rebellion, of poisonous serpents and bitter waters. The Church which seeks to minister with truth and with justice as well as with compassion, must be a Church of purified vision and sensitised hearing, nourished by prayer and silence, a Church which looks beyond itself and its own concerns to the manifesting of the Kingdom of God in the back streets of the earth.

II. The Urban Church and the Struggle for the Kingdom

In my first lecture I suggested that the Church in England had never been fully at home in the urban industrial environment, never really had a feel for the culture of the working class; and I went on to suggest that the inner urban areas, the areas of the church's apparent failure, presented a point of revelation: the revelation that the Constantinian era was at an end; that the Church was a minority movement within society; and that realistic pastoral practice must be based on this recognition. I ended by suggesting that, as the Constantinian era at the outset experienced a "flight to the desert", so at its close, we need a desert movement in reverse, a movement of urban contemplation. Only by deepening the contemplative spirit can we move towards the future with clearer vision and with confidence rooted in reality rather than in illusion.

In this second lecture I want to attempt three things: first, to outline some of the facets of change in the urban areas of Britain in recent years, looking particularly at those areas which experienced riots or disturbances in the summer of 1981; second, to relate the experience of, and reaction to, those areas by the Church to the wider issues in relations between Church and state, Church and government; and third, to consider some theological issues which relate to these questions, and upon which the inner urban experience sheds light. Let me again emphasise that I am drawing in some detail on the British, and specifically the London, urban experience. I am strongly committed to contextual theology. Yet I believe there are some important connections which can be made, both in general and in detail, with your situation in the United States.

In the last decade or so, those of us who have been concerned with urban ministry in Britain have been conscious of three dominant forces: those of poverty, prejudice and powerlessness. The position of the urban poor has been a cause of concern, and a focus for research, since the days of Engels and Chadwick. From

the time that cities developed, they have contained poverty areas, "rookeries", "the abyss", "twilight zones", "pockets of deprivation", or, in today's jargon, "urban priority areas". (Each term is value-laden and carries a load of ideological assumptions.) In England, all the cities have lost population since World War II. The relatively well-to-do have moved out, leaving behind the very wealthy and the poor. Inner city communities have become increasingly unbalanced: my former parish in Bethnal Green, for example, contained the highest proportion of over-65s, and the lowest of 25–34 year-olds, in the whole of Greater London. Of course, economic poverty is not confined to the inner city, and there are more poor people outside the priority areas. Since the present government took power in 1979, the numbers of the poor, on government estimates alone, have increased by 90 per cent. The total of those living on or below the official poverty line is estimated at around 15 million. (By contrast, in the first two years of the present government, those earning over £20,000 per year increased five-fold, and those over £50,000 eleven-fold.) Whether we look at the deteriorating housing, the social problems associated with high-rise blocks, the increasing numbers of homeless and overcrowded families, or at the crumbling health service where we see an "inverse care law" operating (the greater the need, the less the availability of care), the message is the same: the urban areas are suffering great and increasing poverty—poverty of income, poverty of resources, poverty of care. A recent government report, shelved by the minister, on *Inequalities in Health*, confirmed that the correlation between social class and ill health had increased significantly over thirty years. And inevitably we see accelerating rates of suicide, of infant mortality, of depression, of alcoholism and heroin addiction (heroin being one of the few substances which has declined in price and increased in purity since 1979), in juvenile, economically-based, prostitution, and so on. In the midst of national affluence, a new underclass has emerged. The increase in heroin abuse over the last few years has been particularly ominous, for, unlike the earlier epidemic in the 60s, the present spread has been most marked in the three most depressed and economically disadvantaged cities—Liverpool, Dublin and Glasgow—and among the very young and poor.

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But, second, along with the growth of poverty, we have seen a corresponding growth of prejudice against the poor, against the vulnerable, against the casualties. R. H. Tawney held that there was no criterion, except the treatment of children, which so clearly revealed the character and values of a social philosophy as the way in which it responded to those who fell by the wayside. In an EEC survey of 1977 on *The Perception of Poverty in Europe*, 43 per cent of British people blamed poverty on the internal defects of the poor themselves (compared with 24 per cent elsewhere.) While there is some evidence that this is changing, the view of the poor as scroungers, layabouts, scum, or morally perverse has certainly gained ground in recent years. To be poor is a source of shame and contempt, it is to bear the mark of Cain.

Now there was a time when one could speak of "invincible ignorance" and of a "comprehension gap". But today we know more about urban poverty than ever before. Districts like Liverpool 8, Moss Side in Manchester, and Bethnal Green in London are the most over-researched areas in the world. It is a standing joke in these areas: children greet visitors to their schools by asking, "Have you come to research us?" More is known about conditions in these areas, the areas where the riots of 1981 occurred, than is known about Britain as a whole. Yet government ministers could express astonishment and surprise not only at the riots (which close observers had been predicting for some years) but at the conditions which had produced them. The gulf in understanding between government and workers, between the government and the population of the inner cities, as well as between city and suburb, has certainly grown wider. But, sadly, one can no longer speak simply of a comprehension gap: rather of a deliberate refusal to see, a deliberate averting of the eyes, a conscious policy of disengagement from reality. The increase in poverty, the deterioration of the quality of life in the inner areas, the creation of a new underclass, have occurred in inverse ratio to the consciousness of these facts. And this has occurred not only between city and suburb, but within the city itself, between affluent and poor neighborhoods.

Twenty years ago Professor Ruth Glass coined the term "gentrification", and she went on, in a later study, to refer to the

new "upper class ghetto". Today, in London particularly, we see previously mixed areas transformed into one-class areas. The classic example is Islington in North London where the intelligentsia in Canonbury live in close proximity to the poor in Highbury. Or there is Notting Hill where the millionaires of Holland Park adjoin the poor in Notting Dale. The districts are becoming more and more polarised: contact is less and less evident. So incomprehension and illusion are fostered at the very frontiers of disadvantage and despair. Prejudices and stereotypes are reinforced. The black and Asian communities have been at the receiving end of the most fierce and visible forms of such prejudice. For since the introduction of racist legislation—the Immigration Act 1971 and the Nationality Act 1981—to be black is to be suspect. So Asian victims of violent attacks find themselves interrogated as to their immigration status, while black youth find themselves subjected to continual harassment by the police and the courts. In recent years, the view that the true Britishers are the white English, the Northern Irish and the Falkland Islanders has grown. Indeed, had the Falkland Islanders been black, it is unlikely that the war would have been fought at all. The English politician Enoch Powell has praised the Falklands spirit as the rebirth of long overdue nationalism: he has also described the inner cities, unlike the Falklands, as increasingly alien territory.

Third, we see powerlessness. Over the years that I have worked in inner London, the most ominous and persistent mood that I have sensed has been one of despondency, hopelessness and paralysis. Here again the polarising has increased. The advent of middle class pressure groups has made it more difficult for the planners to have their way without resistance—but only in some places. It is impossible to touch a blade of grass on Hampstead Heath without arousing the highly articulate spokespersons of the Hampstead and Highgate Society. But you can put a motorway through Hackney Wick, close down the casualty department of Bethnal Green Hospital, and destroy entire mining communities in the north of England, because these people's opinions are not seen to matter. And here is the bitter contrast with George Orwell's *1984*. At least Winston Smith was considered sufficiently important to be constantly surveyed: today it seems

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that Big Sister doesn't care what working class people think because she knows they do not have the power to do anything. And soon, if the government gets its way, the metropolitan areas will be disenfranchised in terms of locally elected government. London will soon become the only major capital city in the world without its own elected local government. The inner cities are being mercilessly battered by legislation after legislation, and the communities there are well aware of this, but feel powerless to effect change. Their fate does not matter: they have no electoral value.

The sense of hopelessness has particularly affected the two groups who are most exposed to inner city decline on a daily basis: the very old and the very young. The old have seen their communities uprooted, their families moved out, and their old homes destroyed to make room for concrete jungles. The young see little prospect of work ahead of them. In some inner areas, youth unemployment stands at 50 per cent, and, if you are black, at 90 per cent. We see kids coming to school at 11 full of hope and promise, and who leave at 15 without even bothering to take the exams. In my former parish, the extent of youth despair was seen a few years ago in the growth among them of the Young National Front, a neo-Nazi movement. Young white kids were recruited as part of an anti-black campaign of terror, and the large Bangladeshi community close to our church was subjected to almost daily attack, including window-smashing, arson, physical attacks and a number of murders, over a period of several months. The National Front appealed particularly to the youth who were unemployed, or often to school truants with a history of delinquency, kids who had been written off by most agencies, including the churches, and for whom vandalism had become the last available form of social action. The coming of the National Front into this climate of despair represented the expansion of vandalism into a political movement.

The accumulated despair and anger of the inner areas reached its peak in the riots in Bristol in 1980, and in most major cities in 1981. None of us were surprised that they occurred. Government ministers were rushed to Liverpool, which had been the subject of report after report for many years, and expressed horror and

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amazement at the conditions. Suddenly money, which we had been told was not available, appeared. In Brixton, Lord Scarman, a distinguished judge, produced a report: well-presented, polite, substantially accurate within its limits, yet it said nothing that black people and others on the ground in Brixton had not been saying for years. (Indeed, Americans who compare the report with the Kerner Commission Report of 1968 will notice the striking similarities in the conclusions and even the language.) But only when a respectable, elderly, white judge said these things did the nation take notice. Understandably, the feeling has got around: if you want to get change, riot.

Let me now introduce into this account the inner city churches which are located within the riot areas or within areas of continuing upheaval. (For it is important to remember that back street violence and unpublicised clashes and conflicts have been a constant feature of most inner areas before and since 1981.) On the whole, the churches in these areas have played a valuable role, not only in terms of care and ambulance work, but in seeking to change conditions and to alert the nation. In the latter, they have not succeeded. The inner city churches share, to some extent, in the powerlessness of their neighbourhoods. When their pastors speak in the suburbs, they are often not believed. When the occasional urban bishop speaks out, he is subjected to violent abuse by the media. Thus when David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, delivered a major lecture on the BBC TV in April 1984 on the theme of the two nations in Britain, the leading Anglican publishing house, SPCK, produced a symposium by a group of extreme right-wing economists and others attacking his position. When David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, defended the miners, there were calls for his resignation.

Now it is significant that both these bishops have backgrounds in the urban areas. In Sheppard's case, it was his time as a pastor in East London, and later as a bishop in South London, which led him to rethink his theological position, while Jenkins spent some years in inner Manchester. So while the inner city church experience has not significantly altered the complacency and prejudice of the nation, it has certainly affected the thinking of most of the bishops, and it has disturbed the churches

of suburbia. The ferment is still under way. It is interpreted by
the government and media as an abandonment by the Church of
its role of "saving souls". The Church, argued a Conservative MP
recently, should "stick to souls and sin", leaving secular matters
to the politicians. Such comments are repeated daily. Their con-
tent has not essentially changed since 1926 when Prime Minister
Stanley Baldwin asked how the Archbishop of Canterbury would
feel if he were to refer the revision of the Athanasian Creed to
the Iron and Steel Federation.

It is undoubtedly true that during the last few years there
has occurred a growing conflict, and from time to time confron-
tation, between the British government and the Church of En-
gland. (There has been a conflict with the other churches too, but
because of their looser links with the state, they can be more
easily ignored.) This conflict is often attributed to the "politicisa-
tion" of the Church, and there are articles in the press almost
every day on the alleged leftward shift of Church attitudes. This
is partly true and partly false. It is certainly the case that the
experience of pastoral work in the urban areas has radicalised
many pastors, and has pushed them into the political arena. But
this is not a new process, and has been evident from the 1840s
onwards. However, the Church as a whole, as represented by its
house of bishops, its synodical resolutions, its boards, councils and
working parties, has found itself to the left of the government
more often by the fact of staying in the same place. It is the
government, and the ideological mood and assumptions which guide
it, which have moved further and further to the right. The Church
has thus found itself forced into a posture of resistance on issue
after issue: nuclear deterrence, nationality legislation, child ben-
efits, unemployment, the Falkland Islands war, economic policy.
And many have seen this posture of resistance as not incidental
any more but endemic. Talk of a Church-state crisis and
of the disestablishment of the Church of England is back on the
agenda.

Now this growth of resistance is linked with the inner urban
pastoral experience in a number of ways. One is the fact that the
churches are closer to many of the issues, and have more detailed
and reliable knowledge of them, than the government has. Bish-

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ops and urban pastors are in daily contact with immigrants whose families are divided, or whose lives are disrupted, by the cruel immigration rules. Pastoral ministry among the poor and unemployed has led to the emergence in recent years of campaigning organisations such as Church Action on Poverty, and Churches' Action with the Unemployed. In many cases, local churches are the only campaigning groups within their area with easy access to the national media. Again, through the work of local Boards for Social Responsibility and their equivalents, Christians have come to see the connection between national and international issues: on such questions as the arms trade, the pharmaceutical industry, investment in South Africa, and so on. The fact that the inner areas contain many refugees from such places as South Africa, the Philippines and Chile, and many immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean, has meant that churches are in close touch with the casualties of government foreign policy. So in many ways the reawakening of parts of the national Church to social and political awareness is a byproduct of a pastoral involvement in human suffering.

Certainly that has been my own experience. In working with drug abuse in Soho, I found that we were led from personal casualty caring into such areas as campaigning for better preventive and treatment programmes, or for tighter ethical scrutiny of the pharmaceutical industry. In working with the young homeless when we established Centrepoint, an all-night centre in Shaftesbury Avenue, in 1969, we were led into questioning the economic factors which were forcing unemployed youth of Glasgow onto the streets of London. In combating racism on the streets of East London in the shape of the National Front, we were led to see state racism and structural disadvantage as the more serious issues. But the link between pastoral practice and political commitment is not automatic: it requires an upheaval which is absorbed in a transfigured consciousness. So the experience of the Church in the inner areas has been of the need for contemplative listening, for a ministry to the broken, and for a ministry of prophetic advocacy. The three are interlocked: prayer, pastoral care, and prophecy. Not every individual is called to practise each aspect of ministry in equal proportion, but my experience is that, for an

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increasing number of people, the contemplative, the caring and the campaigning roles are found together, nourishing each other and strengthening each other.

In other words, our experience has been that ministry in the inner city has enriched and deepened our pastoral vision, leading to more whole and integrated *praxis*. No longer is spirituality opposed to social activism, or holiness to liberation. No longer is pastoral care seen as involving the avoidance of divisive issues, nor is the personal opposed to the political. And this, often painful, struggle towards a more integrated spirituality has occurred ecumenically. In the Notting Hill area of West London there are three churches, very close together, which serve the same area. One is Anglican, one Roman Catholic, one Methodist. In ministering together in the same neighbourhood, there has been a mutual enrichment of and by each other's traditions, a growing recognition of a theological convergence on most major issues, and a sense that sacramentally, liturgically, and in terms of pastoral strategy, we are very close. The division we have come to see is not between our denominations, but rather between the churches (of all three traditions) in the inner areas and their equivalent churches elsewhere. There has been, in our experience, a growing sense of solidarity within the inner areas between Christians from surprisingly different theological traditions, combined with a growing and worrying sense of incomprehension between inner city and suburban Christians. If that gulf is not bridged, there is a real possibility that the Church may split, and it will be a theological split rooted in pastoral experience. I hope this does not happen: I fear it may. I think therefore that one of the most urgent tasks of those concerned with the fate of the inner areas is not to abandon the suburbs as irredeemable, but to work hard at changing thinking and action there. We would be happy to share ideas with our American brothers and sisters on this urgent issue.

Finally let me consider some theological aspects of the inner urban experience. The first concerns the nature of theology itself. Some years ago the English theologian E. L. Mascall observed that theology was in danger of becoming an extinct discipline within British universities. What Mascall had in mind was that the view

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of theology as a quest for the vision of God and a reflection on the activity of God in the world had been widely abandoned, and replaced by historical and philosophical studies of various kinds. If we can speak of a "suburban captivity" of the churches, we can speak of an "academic captivity" of theology. The experience of the inner city is that theology needs to be rooted in prayer and pain, in the life of worship and in the experience of brokenness. As long as theology is seen as a cerebral discipline which occurs in seminaries and is then applied to the alien environment like fertiliser or deodorant, it cannot be Christian theology. There needs therefore to be not only a "theology of liberation" but, in Segundo's term, a "liberation of theology" itself. I would emphasise in particular the recovery of the rootedness of theology in practical experience. And this raises the question of seminaries as disabling centres. In Britain there have been a number of attempts to prepare people for ordination, and also to practise theological reflection, within the urban environment. The best known example of this is the Methodist-based Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield. It is open to much criticism, but its essential premise is unanswerable: the best preparation for inner city ministry must occur within the inner city. To remove potential pastors into a remote environment as the primary focus of training is a recipe for disaster. Theology must be seen as a process of transformation both of the individual and of the world. To adapt Marx and Engels, previous theologies have explained the world: the task is to change it. Such a view of theology is not a novel idea, but a return to an earlier tradition, the tradition of the Greek Fathers, for whom *theologia* was inseparable from deification. That tradition needs to be re-learned in the light of our concern with social as well as personal change.

Second, we need to recognise both the pastoral toxicity of a theology of incarnation, and the danger of taking incarnation alone as our pastoral basis. The significance of Christology for pastoral action is, I think, twofold. First, it upholds the dignity and potential godlikeness of the poorest and most despised men and women. It is in the faces of the naked, the sick, the broken, and the wounded that we see the form of Christ crucified. The Christological roots of social action are clearly outlined in the early fathers,

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particularly in the writings of St. John Chrysostom, for whom the poor person is a walking sacrament. But, second, an incarnational theology must point not only to the divinity of the human form, but to the humanity of God, and to the materialistic basis of our worship and life. Incarnational faith cannot coexist with a spirituality which denies the value of the flesh and of matter. Thus incarnational spirituality is a spirituality which looks to the material world and the flesh as the source of spiritual transformation. The materialistic basis of Christian spirituality was expressed well by St. John of Damascus during the iconoclastic controversy. He wrote:

> I do not worship matter, but I do worship the creator of matter who for my sake became material, who vouchsafed to dwell in matter, and through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from reverencing matter, for it was through matter that my salvation came to pass.

And yet I see a danger in taking incarnation as the sole principle of pastoral action. And the danger is this. If incarnation is isolated from the Christian teaching about sin, about judgment, about the cross and resurrection, about the conflict between light and darkness, incarnation can become a form of uncritical blessing of everything that moves. A pastoral ministry based upon the incarnation alone will be loving, compassionate and kind, but will lack challenge, confrontation, and that piercing of the heart which is so central to the prophetic word. I believe much pastoral ministry lacks challenge because it is incarnational without being redemptive. Accepting the truth that all persons and all reality are sacred and deiform, it neglects the equal truth that the forces of evil in persons and in structures must be confronted and renounced. It is the pastoral theology of Christmas which does not proceed beyond Ash Wednesday through the cross and grave to resurrection.

Third, the inner urban experience should teach us to be wary of an easy doctrine of reconciliation. A few weeks ago a non-Christian friend, actively involved with the National Union of Mineworkers, said, "Your archbishop has been speaking on the strike. Can you guess what he said?" I replied that I imagined that he had condemned violence on the picket line, probably said

nothing about the role of the police as strikebreakers, and that he had called for reconciliation. I was right in every detail. Now I am not against reconciliation, but we need to recall two facts. First, it is not the only Christian doctrine, nor is it the dominant model for redemption in the New Testament. The Gospels suggest that the immediate impact of the proclamation of the gospel is division, upheaval, and resistance. "I have come to bring not peace but a sword. . . . I have come to set fire to the earth" is a gospel saying which we ignore at our peril. The teaching of Jesus is full of such hard sayings about the heroic demands of the Kingdom. On the other hand, the only two people who are described as being "reconciled" as a result of Jesus' preaching are Herod and Pilate. The second fact is that reconciliation can only be the fruit of truth and of justice, and a message of reconciliation which bypasses the necessary struggle for truth and justice can be a way of treating people's just demands with the contempt of those who seek to heal the wounds of the people lightly, those who cry "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

Many people and groups in the inner city seek to paper over cracks, to pretend that all is well, to unite on generalities and ignore the causes of pain. Churches and political parties take refuge in slogans and in generalities. In 1978, when racism was a major factor in the East London local elections, a group of us called together a meeting of all the political and religious groups in our area who opposed racism to work on a common pre-election manifesto. We quickly found it was impossible. On the one side were the Conservative Party and the Communist Party, as opportunistic as ever, who were calling for a "popular front", a generalised anti-racist statement which would contain nothing controversial. On the other side was the combination of the socialist feminists, the Trotskyists and the Church, insisting that a statement which did not identify the specific forms of racism (in housing allocation, in illegal immigration raids, in policing) was useless. In the middle was the Labour Party which said: "We don't mind what you say, but if the Tories sign it, we won't." Unity which is not based on a real grappling with painful truth is bogus. True reconciliation can only be the fruit of truth and justice. Just conflict is always preferable to unjust peace.

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Fourth, I believe we can derive from the urban experience a sense of the necessary integration of contemplation and prophecy, and the dependence of one upon the other. One fundamental truth which was driven home to me in working with very damaged young people in the Soho clubs was that the work of reparation and intercession, the work of contemplation, was absolutely central to any healing ministry. A hyper-active church and pastorate contributes to the problem, not the solution, of urban distress. And the cities are littered with the casualties of such hyper-activity. Today we call it "burn-out", a term derived presumably from electricity. The clergy seem particularly prone to this. In the 1960s in Soho we called it the "Simon syndrome" after our friends in the Simon Community who prided themselves on never going to bed. The hyper-active pastor who relies on his or her own resources rather than on God is actually not only a fool but a menace. Such people become positively dangerous to their victims, communicating to them only their own exhaustion and inner emptiness. Such people do well to remember the definition of a theologian in the writings of St. Gregory Nazianzen: one who, unlike the madman, does not lose his breath. In the desert tradition, the use of the Jesus Prayer was seen as a way of uniting prayer with one's breathing: a prayerless ministry will be a breathless ministry, a ministry for madmen. Yet such hyperactivity is seen today as efficiency and as sanity. Hence the need in pastoral care to return to the heart, the still centre, to attain one's right mind. This turning of the mind, *metanoia*, is the central aim of the life of prayer and contemplation: a unifying process, the recovery of wholeness, so that we can see things whole and be instruments of wholeness to others.

Finally, the urban experience points us away from the Church, seen as an end in itself, to the central New Testament symbol of the Kingdom of God. It is just over sixty years since Percy Widdrington predicted that the recovery of the Kingdom of God as the regulative principle of theology would bring about a reformation compared with which the reformation of the 16th Century would appear a small thing. Widdrington believed that the purpose of the Church was to witness to the Kingdom of God, to God's transforming activity in the world: to the extent that the

Church promoted itself, rather than the Kingdom, it was disloyal and unfaithful. Today we are seeing the truth of Widdrington's words as the Christian world is increasingly divided into those for whom the Kingdom of God involves a hope for the transformation of the world, and those for whom it is a purely inward and spiritual experience. There is also a growing pastoral division between Church Christians and Kingdom Christians: that is, between those for whom the Church is an end in itself and for whom pastors are essentially churchkeepers; and those for whom the Church is secondary to the Kingdom. The attitude we take to this division will have enormous consequences in pastoral theology. Is our aim to gather everyone into the church institution? Or is it to discern, and then to point to, the activity of God in the world, the ways in which God is mending his broken creation, sometimes through, often in spite of, the Church? In the encyclical of the 18 Bishops of the Third World, issued in 1968, there is a highly significant paragraph in which the bishops speak of the need to recognise the hand of God in those world events by which the mighty are put down from their seats and the humble are exalted, the hungry are fed and the rich sent away empty. In the Church of England, the words of the *Magnificat* are said daily, but one feels that, if they are believed at all, the hope is (in Conrad Noel's words) that the mighty will be put down from their seats so gently that they will not feel the bump when they hit the ground.

The inner city experience, on the other hand, suggests to us that the working out of God's purposes takes strange forms, and the role of a contemplative, listening, discerning church is to recognise what God is up to. And this may lead us out to the edges, to the margins, of the ecclesiastical structures where our vision is clearer and the view less cluttered. For some it may mean severing links with the Church in order to be closer to humanity. A dear friend, a worker priest in London, has recently, after thirty years working as an electrician in a factory, returned his licence to the bishop. He has done so because he could no longer bear to live in two unconnected and unconnecting worlds, and he had to choose. He chose the workplace, because "my loyalty to that life seemed a commitment toward God equal to, or

greater than, my obligation to celebrate the sacrament in the company of believers." He went on:

> It has not been simply the problem of living simultaneously in two worlds which show no signs of coming together. This by itself would have called for nothing more than a deepening of one's contemplative powers, hard enough to achieve but not out of the question by the grace of God. What has tipped the scales has been a growing understanding that the radicalism of the Gospel in which I have always believed insofar as I have been willing to face it, cannot after all live with a power system like the institutional Church. The Gospel must either bring down power systems or itself be crucified.

And he goes on to suggest that the institutional Church is not willing, or able, to rethink its symbols or abandon its power. Whether it can die and rise again is God's business, not ours.

That path, away from the Church in order to be closer to the activity of God in the back streets, may not be for all, though I guess it will be a path followed by many in the coming years. The Church of England is still, slowly and intermittently, discussing the ministry of women: but most intelligent women left it years ago. It is in danger of losing a whole generation of black Christians. But God is not confined to the institution, nor is the Kingdom built by us. Nowhere in the New Testament are we told to build the Kingdom: the language of the Kingdom has more to do with recognition, with discernment, with humble acceptance, with faithfulness to the vision. Nowhere in the New Testament is the Kingdom identified with the Church: rather the Church is seen as leaven, the purpose of which is to act as a creative ferment within the loaf. Were the whole to be made into leaven, as Segundo says, that would not be success but disaster. So the Church should be seen as an important minority in the world, a sign of contradiction, a confessing community.

My worker priest friend put it like this a few years ago. "God is at work in these streets. As usual with God, it is difficult to know what he is up to. Our task is to have our eyes open so that when God reveals himself to the common people, we don't have our backs turned." My experience in the inner urban areas is that

God is at work outside the churches, among the broken, among the voiceless, among the neglected, the *anawim*, the little people. The contemplative and prophetic task is to stand still and see the salvation of God: to abide in the darkness and upheaval, and to discern, sometimes slowly and painfully, what God is up to. All Christian action, all true discipleship, must be born out of this vision.

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