

THEOLOGY IN THE CITY: TEN YEARS AFTER *FAITH IN THE CITY*

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Thirty years ago, Harvey Cox's book *The secular city* was hailed enthusiastically by reviewers as a major contribution to Christian social thought. *The secular city* reflected an increasingly popular theological trend of the time in its accommodation to the decline of traditional and institutional Christianity in the West as a sign of 'humanity come of age'. Cox's thesis was that the process of secularization liberated urban society from ancient social ties and outdated metaphysics and enabled it to fashion itself according to the values of reciprocity, interdependence and mature responsibility. The secular city was for Cox a symbol for the theological notion of the 'Kingdom of God'. 'The partnership of God and man in history' was now made flesh in the ultimate realization of human-divine co-operation and co-creation, not in an other-worldly realm but in the midst of human history; free from the anachronistic world-views of traditional religion, the churches could more authentically embrace the reality of God's redemptive presence and activity in the world.

Today, the Gospel summons man to frame with his neighbour a common life suitable to the secular city. He responds by leaving behind familiar patterns of life that are no longer *a propos* and by setting out to invent new ones ..

The coming of the secular city is a historical process which removes adolescent illusions. Freed from these fantasies man is expected to assume the status of sonship, maturity, and responsible stewardship.¹

Cox's utopian portrayal of the modern city as the cradle of human liberation and the triumph of liberal values of progress, enlightenment and technological mastery is thoroughly in keeping with its time. In identifying the modern city as the triumph of

* This paper was presented at an international seminar on 'Minorities' held in Lausanne, Switzerland, between the Department of Religions and Theology, University of Manchester, and the Faculty of Theology, University of Lausanne, in February 1995.

¹ H. Cox, *The secular city* (London: SCM, 1965), 121.

human reason and agency over superstition and tradition, and celebrating the liberating potential of technological progress, Cox articulates the values of the liberal Enlightenment. And yet in the short space of a generation, Cox's vision has become barely recognizable. In 1965 the secular city was the solution to human finitude and injustice, where the anonymity and social mobility of urban life signalled an emergent 'technopolis' where humanity would create anew communities founded on consent, freedom and mature responsibility. In 1995 Western cities are regarded as places of decay, danger and fragmentation; no longer centres of population growth, economic activity or cultural inspiration.

One way of looking at this contrast might be to consider Cox's archetypical urban dweller as exemplified in the quotation above. 'Urban man' takes for granted the possession and exercise of autonomy, mobility and privilege in order to achieve his dreams of 'sonship, maturity, and responsible stewardship'. Surely, the city is a delightful place – but only if you are white, male, able-bodied, employed and wealthy. However, the city of the 1990s is in reality inhabited by those who do not fit this specification: the unemployed, the elderly, women, the low-paid and ethnic minorities, all of whom in various ways are excluded from or denied the liberal dream of prosperity and independence.²

So Cox's vision seems hopelessly outdated, devoid of any understanding of the city as a place of marginalization and exclusion; not a place of expansive vision and promise but instead a wasteland of decay and impoverishment. In wholeheartedly embracing the promise of the secular city, Cox rightly eschewed the tendency of Christian theology to deny the material and immanent emphasis of the Christian Gospel; but in so closely associating the 'Kingdom' with 'this-worldly' communities and values, he left no room for a more critical or 'prophetic' stance.³

Over the past decade, these dilemmas have grown even more acute as the darker side of city life has become more apparent. This paper will attempt to assess the past decade of Christian social thought and *praxis* with reference to the British urban context. It will evaluate the significance of the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the city*, and identify the extent it has

² Critics of the original claims of the political, intellectual and economic developments associated with the Enlightenment have commented that its version of the rational individual, exercising choice and acting freely in the public domain actually only reflects the aspirations of a small class of scientists, philosophers and entrepreneurs. Essentially, the liberal Enlightenment reflected the self-interest of a small elite of educated, privileged white males. See S. Hall, 'Introduction', *Formations of modernity*, eds S. Hall and B. Gieben (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 1–16.

³ In many respects, Cox's vision was already obsolete by the time he wrote. By the mid-1960s many of the nostrums of urban planning in the U.S.A. and U.K. were already being called into question.

proved to mark a watershed in social theology. By focusing attention of Church and society on the inner city, urban development and local economies, by opting for preferential action on the part of marginalized and minority communities, and by registering a debt to the theologies of liberation in its analysis, the Commission signalled a new era in relationships between Church and State and stimulated new patterns and priorities for intervention and involvement by the Church in local communities.

But did *Faith in the city* herald a genuinely new way of 'doing theology in the city' as some commentators maintain? Do the methods and conclusions of the Archbishop's Commission represent a model of empowerment of the poor and marginalized or simply another variety of ecclesiastical paternalism? And what of the theological commitments of subsequent Christian thought? How influential and how lasting has been the impact of projects which, in the wake of *Faith in the city*, explicitly espouse the methods and values of liberation theology? My paper will conclude with an evaluation of a series of projects by the Manchester-based campaigning group, Church Action on Poverty, which have attempted to adopt new patterns of working which privilege the voices of the 'grass-roots', insisting that theology is the work of the people and not the pronouncements of church officials. It is possible that *Faith in the city* did mark a watershed in English Christian social thought; but the prospects for future faith and action are by no means clear.

To understand the context of *Faith in the city* it is important to recall the state of Britain in the early years of the 1980s. The Conservative Government, headed by Mrs Margaret Thatcher, had been elected in May 1979 with a manifesto which attacked many of the assumptions of British 'consensus' politics after 1945. In the following years, a series of economic and political reforms were introduced which reflects the influence upon the Conservative Party during the 1970s of the so-called 'New Right' in economics and political philosophy. We can discern at least three emphases to British social and economic policy since 1979. First, the adoption of *laissez-faire* economics (broadly, an attempt to return to nineteenth-century classical liberalism); secondly, the resolve to 'roll back the frontiers of the State' – to reduce public expenditure and to liberate the citizen (or consumer) from intrusive and wasteful taxation and government intervention – which was manifested most acutely in the gradual abolition of the powers of local government; and thirdly an almost religious zeal to transform the cultural and social climate of Britain in the attack on many of the so-called 'progressive' causes of the 1960s and 1970s: feminism, sexual liberation, permissiveness, youth culture – all expressions of a 'socialist' creed regarded as the

root of Britain's current malaise. Mrs Thatcher's celebrated comment, 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'⁴ reflects well both the economic and moral philosophy of 'Thatcherism': a belief that government exists primarily to enable the individual to maximize choice and that all other forms of state intervention are dangerous forms of a redundant collectivism.⁵

The Government's commitment to reduce public expenditure coincided with the most acute recession since the 1930s, the most tangible effect of which was the resurgence of mass unemployment. During the 1950s and 1960s unemployment had rarely exceeded half a million; but throughout the 1980s it never fell below 2.7 million.⁶

Public concern at the effects of such trends in generating social divisions intensified following outbreaks of civil disorders ('riots') in the summer of 1980 and 1981, across the inner cities of Britain's major metropolitan areas. An enquiry into the causes of the riots in Brixton, in London, concluded that such disturbances had to be seen in the context of deepening social deprivation and economic inequality.⁷

At the same time, other social researchers were confirming the reality of widespread poverty and disadvantage in British society, employing the language of 'relative poverty': of deprivation as involving inability to participate in activities or to gain opportunities generally assumed and encouraged by the rest of society.⁸ Poverty was therefore linked strongly with political and social alienation as well as material inequality. Whereas in 1979 at least one household in twelve of the population and one child in ten were considered to be in a household in receipt of less than half the average wage, by 1993 these figures had increased to one family in four and one child in three.⁹

The churches in Britain participated in responding to some of the growing concern on these issues. In 1983 the Methodist Church inaugurated a series of local projects to tackle poverty and inequality via its 'Mission Alongside the Poor' programme,¹⁰ and the Church of England was also beginning to muster its resources. Following the prompting of a group of bishops from urban dioceses, the

⁴ *Woman's Own*, October 1987; also quoted in R.H. Preston, *Religion and the ambiguities of capitalism* (London: SCM, 1991).

⁵ H. Clark, *The Church under Thatcher* (London: SPCK, 1992), Chapter 1.

⁶ The Report of the Commission on Social justice, *Social justice: strategies for national renewal* (London: Vintage, 1994), 28–35. (Hereafter referred to as the Borrie Commission.)

⁷ *The Brixton disorders* (The Scarman Report) (London: HMSO, Cmnd Paper 8427, 1981).

⁸ P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

⁹ The Borrie Commission (1994), 32.

¹⁰ N. Cooper, *All mapped out? A critical evaluation of the Methodist Mission Alongside the Poor Programme* (Manchester: William Temple Foundation, 1992).

Archbishop of Canterbury established a Commission of Enquiry into the state of the inner cities.

The choice of the term 'Commission' is significant: prior to 1979, successive governments were prone to set up 'Royal Commissions' on matters of state importance. It is perhaps an indication of the distinctive approach of the Thatcher regime, and its break with much of the post-war consensus of British politics, that this practice had more or less been abandoned by 1985; so it is significant that the Church chose such a term for its enquiry. It is suggestive both of its awareness of the gravity of the issue for the nation at large, and also of the Church's responsibility to articulate a response, given its status as the Established Church in England. In this respect, the appointment of the Commission was entirely in keeping with the self-understanding of the Church as upholding those (generally Christian) values underpinning the social order, and aiming to embody in its public pronouncements such shared moral values at the heart of public life.¹¹

Further evidence of the Church's assumptions concerning the role and function of the exercise, and which undoubtedly influenced the approach of the eventual Report, may be gleaned from the Commission's membership. It was chaired by Sir Richard O'Brien, a retired senior civil servant, and the Secretary to the Commission was seconded from the Department of the Environment: further indications of the Commission's implicit self-understanding as a 'civil' as well as 'ecclesial' body. Its other seventeen members were drawn from senior church positions, inner city parishes, industry, academia and the voluntary and public sector.¹²

During its two-year lifetime, from September 1983 to 1985, the 'Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas' (ACUPA) received 283 submissions from voluntary and statutory bodies and individuals. It is customary for such Commissions to summon written evidence; but another distinguishing feature of ACUPA was its less conventional practice of actually visiting many of the areas under discussion. Members spent time in inner city parishes in the North East and North West of England, Merseyside, east London and the English Midlands. The Commission was therefore at pains to establish that this was by no means an 'armchair' enterprise, but

¹¹ J. Habgood, *Church and nation in a secular age* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983); G. Moyser, 'The Church of England and politics: patterns and trends', in *Church and politics today: essays on the role of the Church of England in contemporary politics*, ed. G. Moyser (Edinburgh; T. & T. Clark, 1985), 1-24.

¹² Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the city* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), v-vi. A further group of advisers included representatives from church-related social action/research bodies, including John Atherton from the William Temple Foundation, John Gladwin from the Board for Social Responsibility and Eric James from the pressure group Christian Action – all experienced and authoritative figures, and representative of a 'broad left' of mainstream Christian social thought.

one which attempted, wherever possible, to enter into the situation of those in urban priority areas.¹³ Such a commitment to acquiring first-hand experience of the 'grass-roots' marks a further significant shift in the methods and theological convictions of Church pronouncements on public issues.

The Report portrays the English city as predominantly a place of economic decline, physical decay and social disadvantage. Although there are pockets of prosperity, 'for the most part opportunities for jobs, for housing and for the desired amenities of social services, shopping, schools and leisure have shifted out of the industrial city'.¹⁴ Thus, alongside a prosperous, suburban or rural Britain, there are inner-city districts of multiple deprivation, comprised of populations and industries that have been 'left behind' in the changing economic circumstances of the 1980s.

It is also interesting to reflect on the ambivalence expressed by the Report about the nature of urban life. Cities are characterized as 'areas from which people and wealth depart and in which poverty and powerlessness remain'.¹⁵ In this respect, the Commission acknowledges a remarkably equivocal attitude in British culture towards the city: it is depicted both as the source of civilized values and the home of depravity, squalor and conflict. The Report summarizes the sources of the malaise of inner cities as follows: 'unemployment, decayed housing, sub-standard educational and medical provision, and social disintegration'.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the Commissioners relied on Government statistics for indicators of economic and social advantage and disadvantage, interpreted by means of a statistical device known as a 'Z-score', which correlates indices of multiple deprivation.¹⁷ The districts thereby designated 'Urban Priority Areas' – which may be an outer estate or inner-city district – are effectively 'a different Britain, whose people are prevented from entering fully into the mainstream of the normal life of the nation'.¹⁸ The Commission identified a crucial connection between the poverty of UPAs and patterns of power, opportunity and wealth in an increasingly unequal society:

A statistical portrait of UPAs thus becomes eventually an elaborate picture of inequality. In the foreground appear the shabby streets, neglected houses and

¹³ *Faith in the city*, 1985, xiv. R. O'Brien, 'Introducing the Report' *Faith in the Scottish city* (Edinburgh: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 1986), 1.

¹⁴ *Faith in the city*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

sordid demolition sites of the inner city, in the middle ground the vandalised public spaces of the peripheral estates, while in the background are the green and wooded suburbs of middle Britain. The UPAs lie at the centre of an unequal society, their poverty obscured by the busy shopping precincts of mass consumption, their bare subsistence of dole and supplementary benefit existing alongside material opulence.¹⁹

However, the belief is that ‘..cities are still flourishing centres of social, economic, and political life.. we confidently assert that the planned resurgence of the British city is both possible and desirable in the immediate future’.²⁰ As we shall see, this emphasis on ‘keeping faith with the city’ is a strong theme of the Report, and strongly informs its insistence on the efficacy of ameliorative action.

The Report is candid about the dwindling status of the local church in UPAs. It acknowledges that, historically, the Church of England may well have been a significant source of such ambivalence, representing more the rural idyll than the urban utopia; and it has long been recognized that the churches neglected the urban working-class in the years following the Industrial Revolution. The Church of England, like the city itself, was perceived as struggling, but resilient, managing to maintain a precarious existence, frequently the only organized Christian presence in the area and often the only sizeable voluntary or community-based group as well. For this reason, proposals for the renewal of urban priority areas are addressed in equal measure to Church and nation; and the significance of *Faith in the city* rests as much in its recommendations to the local church as to national policy.²¹

Thus, the Report urges a number of reforms upon the local Church in UPAs. It must reflect the diversity of its local culture, relate to the neighbourhood and overcome alienation of community to church. It must foster new forms of leadership, Christian education and worship that are appropriate to local people. There must be new patterns of ordained ministry to encourage indigenous leadership; and theological training must more fully reflect and prepare ordinands for the realities of urban ministry.

The most significant administrative proposal to the national Church concerned the setting up of a ‘Church Urban Fund’, which should aim to build up capital assets (£18 million) derived from central grants and diocesan fund-raising, and direct such monies to

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Ibid., xvi.

²¹ It is perhaps unique amongst Anglican social reports to dwell so specifically on the local congregation; and again, this may be a distinguishing feature for the future, in that it recognises the potential gulf between social responsibility reports researched and aimed at Church leadership, and the attitudes and activities of the ordinary parish church-goer.

local programmes of regeneration, community development and employment opportunities.²²

'Proposals to Government and Nation' were mainly concerned with a series of policy areas in which central and local government should devote resources to urban regeneration in partnership with the voluntary sector and in consultation with local people. This included local economic regeneration: support for small businesses in Urban Priority Areas and greater public expenditure on job creation and welfare benefit; a programme of public housing investment and new building; a more extensive programme of positive health care; affirmation of the centrality of statutory provision in social service provision; support for education and the youth service; defence of the 'rehabilitative ideal' in the criminal justice system in the face of more punitive policies.

The Report of the Commission was greeted with a ferocious attack upon its findings by senior members of the Government and their supporters in the media. It was not the first time that the Conservatives had launched a 'pre-emptive strike' on Church Reports to which it took objection; but its opponents definitely went nuclear over *Faith in the city*, denouncing it as 'Marxist'.²³ Given the 'conviction politics' of the Government, it was unlikely that the Report would have been well received; but it certainly succeeded in sparking a public debate. *Faith in the city* itself eventually sold over 50,000 copies; and a recent assessment of its significance for public policy concludes that the Report – and perhaps ironically, the Government's condemnation – did succeed in creating a climate of greater concern for poverty and inner-city issues, to which even government policy had eventually to concede.²⁴

The Report opens with a (sociological) paradox: 'The Church does not have particular competence or a distinguished record in proposing social reforms; but the Church of England has a presence in all the UPAs, and a responsibility to bring their needs to the attention of all the nation'.²⁵ The 'established' position of the Church means that, historically, it has been seen as 'the Tory Party at prayer', a predominantly middle-class church, part of the fabric of the state, emphasizing continuity, conservatism and conventional values; and yet, its very presence at the heart of the establishment, its statutory responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the whole of

²² For an assessment of the work of the Church Urban Fund, with particular reference to Manchester, see D. Finneron. 'Church involvement as a development agency in the community' (University of Manchester M.Phil. thesis, 1990).

²³ H. Young, *One of us* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 416–18.

²⁴ Clark, *The Church under Thatcher*, 105–6.

²⁵ *Faith in the city*, xvi.

England and the 'cure of souls' of all people within a given geographical area, regardless of religious affiliation, also affords it unique access to every aspect of English society. This enabled the Report to argue for the Church to adopt the role of *champion* of those who find no representation or advocate in any other institution by nature of its comprehensive coverage of, and access to, the life of the nation.

ACUPA used this to their advantage, arguing that the parish system places the Church in a unique position to promote community and participation, because each priest and congregation has a responsibility for all the population in a district. A true and comprehensive responsibility for the whole community exhorts the church to share its resources and opportunities for service, to pursue practical collaboration with secular agencies and other faith-communities. It envisaged that forms of 'community development' would therefore be an entirely appropriate expression of inner-city ministry. But an essential paradox presents itself here: the Church of England has universal coverage of England because of its parish system only due to its established status; but this is also being presented, not without foundation, as being the basis on which the Church can express its solidarity with the ordinary people!

There is no reason to think that the gospel is more authentically lived out in 'comfortable Britain'. On the contrary, we have again and again found evidence of a vitality and generosity in Church life in deprived areas which is a challenge to more affluent congregations... The failure of the Church today is not just a failure to respond to need; it is .. a failure to attend to the voices, the experience and the spiritual riches of the 'poor' in its midst.²⁶

The Church is thus portrayed both as marginal to the city, and yet simultaneously uniquely placed to speak on behalf of the marginalized. However, this may be a contradiction that is impossible to sustain.

Faith in the city has been criticized for its political 'naivety' by its advocacy of policy solutions which were dependent on government intervention. Critics believed that in this respect the Commission failed to appreciate, or engage with, the shift in political philosophy represented by the Thatcher administration, and the extent to which the economic and social doctrines of the 'New Right' made it reluctant to consider state intervention as an effective or appropriate vehicle of urban regeneration. Its inability to take seriously the primacy of the free market thus arguably hampered its capacity to take on government policy on its own terms; but perhaps this slowness in fully acknowledging the extent

²⁶ Ibid., 62.

of the ideological shift to the New Right reflects a Church operating on theological presuppositions – rooted in its historically established position – which were better suited to an earlier era of ‘consensus’ politics.²⁷

It has been fashionable to dismiss the theology of the Report. Although it has its limitations, however, there was much that was courageous and visionary. Underlying it are a number of important and notable commitments: that the ‘facts’ of a given situation are fundamental for theological reflection and action; that those with least access to power have a unique, if neglected, perspective, to which the Church must give voice; that faith is more than individual salvation, but the realization of social justice; and that theology is the articulation of the ultimate principles and values that bring such action into being.²⁸

Another feature of *Faith in the city* is the centrality of two theological concepts: ‘the Kingdom of God’ and *koinonia*, or community. The Report argues that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God was envisaged as a vision of human society in which worldly standards of wealth, privilege and power were to be overturned. Theological tradition testifies to a God who is concerned for the right ordering of society; and Christian social thought keeps alive the possibility of realizing a better world amidst the fallenness of the present. It speaks of the priorities of the responsible acquisition and distribution of wealth, of the importance of protecting the weak and vulnerable; and of ‘the existence in Scripture of a different paradigm of social and economic relationships’.²⁹

The insistence on the primacy of community also draws upon clear biblical precedent, from the Pauline emphasis on ‘building up’ the faithful, to the witness to all forms of *koinonia* as essential to the realization of the Kingdom. The Christian doctrine of humanity is one that necessitates mutuality, solidarity and interdependence within which ‘the God-given potential of each one of us is developed’.³⁰

A Christian community is one that is open to, and responsible for, the whole of the society in which it is set, and proclaims its care for the weak, its solidarity with all, and its values which lie beyond the mere satisfaction of material needs.³¹

Such a commitment poses a challenge to the nature of theology itself. The Western emphasis on theology as a deductive and

²⁷ R. Plant, ‘Conservative capitalism: theological and moral challenges’, in *Theology in the city*, ed. A. Harvey (London: SPCK, 1989), 68–97. H. Clark, *The Church under Thatcher*, 112–13.

²⁸ *Faith in the city*, Chapter 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*

intellectual activity is countered by the vitality of Third World approaches which emphasize the critical and practical character of theology. Liberation Theology argues that knowledge reflects the concerns and interests of those who practise it; and it places in contrast with Western academic theology an alternative tradition, of theology for and by the poor. This activity has emerged from 'base communities' which sustain reflection and activity in the midst of extreme poverty and oppression. *Faith in the city* expresses a hope that parallel groups will emerge in UPAs, which would start from personal experience and story, reflecting the concerns of the community and the poor. Rather than intellectual formulations of doctrine, theological practice and profession would then be about the transformation of everyday lives. Such a shift of priorities might also be effected by new styles of Christian education and training for ministry.

Above all, the theology of the Report is an affirmation of the world – and specifically, even the neglected and marginalized realm of the secular city – as the place of encounter with the Divine:

We believe that God, though infinitely transcendent, is also to be found, despite all appearances, in the apparent waste lands of our inner cities and housing estates; ... that the city is not to be shunned as a concentration of evil but enjoyed as a unique opportunity for human community; that the justice of God, as revealed in Scripture, is a standard by which all human institutions must be judged; that society, in our fallen world, cannot be purged of its imperfections by careful planning, maintenance and repair .. but requires redemption through suffering and self-giving undertaken in solidarity with Christ ...³²

This is a commitment to an 'incarnational' faith, therefore; and one which shares many of Harvey Cox's themes of the immanence of God, and the potential of human community and rational, creative endeavour to speak of the Divine. However, there are also subtle shifts. The unalloyed triumphs of human reason and technology, of humankind 'come of age' is now questioned; instead, ACUPA emphasizes the brokenness of the city, which is portrayed as a more muted and tragic landscape than the 'secular city'. So there is a different timbre to this particular theology of incarnation. The sphere of human agency and the fruits of freedom and progress are not signs of human perfectibility, but rather integral elements of the flawed human condition; yet they are also redolent with the salvific possibility of a creation redeemed through the suffering of the crucified Christ.

However, it is questionable whether the theology of ACUPA is prepared fully to embrace a theology of the Cross. Perhaps it might have appeared too excessive to equate the conditions of the UPAs

³² Ibid., 70.

with the Passion of Christ, although much of Liberation Theology makes precisely this connection: that the poor are experiencing a kind of 'Calvary', that such injustice represents truly a crisis in human affairs, but that the Church is called to identify with, and bring to birth, a resurrection of love and justice.

Thus, again, we experience a fundamental contradiction at the heart of *Faith in the city*. It reflects the best of Anglican social thought, founded on a robust incarnational theology, in which God's self-identification with humanity is seen to render the things of the world – cities, human reason, social 'facts', governments, even Church Commissions – as fundamentally the channels through which God effects grace and salvation. Society is given the Church's blessing as expressing the highest human values; and theology speaks in the terms of the everyday world, articulating those 'natural' and self-evident values, just as the Church is available, unconditionally and equally for all, to assist with the pains and celebrations of life. Yet such a vision can easily become a form of theological functionalism. The status quo is believed to be thus ordained by God; particular cultural phenomena are regarded as permanent institutions of creation rather than contingent and particular products of specific human relations. Whilst such an incarnational theology provides perfect expression for the Church of England's position in a settled, harmonious social order, and resists any tendencies towards sectarianism or withdrawal from the public or civic arena, therefore, it fares less well in providing a sharper, more distinctive profile for the Church in a world of unjust social relations and distorted human potential.

Clearly, ACUPA finds it imperative to bear witness to alternative models of human community founded not on individualism, competition and profit but upon interdependence, charity and mutuality. It also recognizes the symbolic power of local congregations living out such a witness as a prefiguration of a more perfect vision. Yet it seems to want a 'Kingdom' theology without too great a rupture of the existing order. The fact is, however, the *koinonia* and Kingdom of which ACUPA speaks are the products of a Christian vision which regarded such communities and definitive visions as radically at odds with earthly powers; as splitting asunder conventional patterns of family, state and temporal responsibility. *Faith in the city* is therefore caught theologically, as it is caught sociologically, between wholehearted identification with, and radical dissent from, the existing social order.

Despite its contradictions, *Faith in the city* has proved decisive for the development of English Christian social thought and practice. It has provided the impetus for a decade of community-based projects and initiatives alongside marginalized and disadvantaged urban communities. As well as the Church of England's own Church Urban Fund, other church-related pressure

groups have adopted many of the commitments and perspectives of *Faith in the city*, reflecting its focus on grass-roots local activity and taking further its implicit debt to the 'preferential option for the poor' of theologies of liberation.

One such group is based in Manchester. Founded in 1982, 'Church Action on Poverty' is an ecumenical and national pressure group, concerned with studying the causes of poverty and highlighting the experiences of those who struggle against it. It organizes campaigns and lobbies of Parliament to bring attention to government policies; it seeks to influence the public debate and climate of opinion within the churches. In this respect, although it is an independent, membership-based organization, it has taken to itself ACUPA's dual responsibilities of addressing Church and Nation. Since the end of the 1980s CAP has forged an increasing emphasis on linking up with local groups and communities, of directing its campaigns towards its grass-roots membership, and co-ordinating its resources into programmes by which such locally based activities and perspectives can be brought into the public domain. In this respect, it is explicitly modelling itself on the understanding of theology as local and contextual: of developing the commitment to 'local theology' as envisaged by *Faith in the city*; and of grounding its own public statements and campaigns on an appeal to the authoritative expertise of those with direct experience of poverty. Such a conscious and deliberate adoption of such a method is not exceptional. Many other agencies working in areas as diverse as overseas aid, charitable and community work advocate models founded on 'empowerment' rather than paternalism; but it is instructive to examine in greater detail the steps taken by CAP to make such a commitment a reality.

An early project, *Hearing the cry of the poor*, consciously modelled itself on Liberation Theologies originating from Southern Africa and Latin America.³³ These involved ordinary Christians speaking out against the collusion of Church with oppressive State and calling for a new social order and new forms of Christian witness which explicitly embody the values of the Kingdom. *Hearing the cry of the poor* mirrors this style: of identifying the injustices embedded in social structures; of naming the effects of government policy; of appealing to the poor as critics of oppressive regimes and arbiters of the new; of seeking to articulate a new Christian spirituality which aligns itself with the struggle of the poor to achieve justice. The process began in 1988 with the drafting of a 'confessional statement' for consultation. CAP established a drafting

³³ *The Kairos document: a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1985); *The road to Damascus: kairos and conversion* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1989).

process in which the phrases and sentiments of the proposed Declaration were debated and redrafted by local groups, both church-related and community-based.

Local CAP groups and community organizations debated it, and it was adopted in September 1989, and launched on 4 December of that year. It bore several similarities to *Faith in the city*. Like the earlier Report, *Hearing the cry of the poor* also received a fair amount of press coverage; and it was also quickly condemned by Conservative ministers and their media supporters. The uncompromising social analysis of the Declaration was seen as further proof of the churches' abdication of their role as the nation's moral arbiter, and their captivity by the forces of secularism and unbelief.³⁴

Like *Faith in the city*, the Declaration also placed great emphasis on the authority of those who spoke directly from an experience of poverty and marginalization. But here, the whole point of the Declaration was to underline the moral authority that the experience of the marginalized minority exerted on the rich majority: to stress the imperatives it placed on the many to take responsibility for the circumstances of the few.³⁵

We have heard with our own ears the cry of the poor. We have seen with our own eyes our society driven in a direction that contradicts the Gospel. Wounding effects are witnessed and experienced daily. *They challenge us to seek a new social order* founded upon that vision and possibility of human wholeness which is contained in the Christian message and which speaks to all human experience.³⁶

The structure of the Declaration has three sections: 'What Has Happened to our Common Life?' which quotes statistical evidence of worsening poverty and inequality; states that reliance on market forces favours the rich and harbours a socially divisive

³⁴ Paul Goggins, 'Standing on the firing line: the launch of the CAP Declaration', *From faith to action*, ed. Hilary Russell (London: Christian Action Journal, 1990), 4–5. Interestingly, despite the emphasis within the drafting process by CAP itself upon consulting local community groups and articulating their concerns, and despite the presence at the launch of representatives from CAP groups in the North-East, much of the press coverage the following day was of the nature of 'Church leaders denounce government policies'. Clearly, the media found it made more compelling and controversial news to represent the Declaration as a statement of church leadership, thus neglecting much of the effort by CAP to embody a new way of working in the Declaration. Perhaps again this reveals the tension between Church as national lobbying institution and church at local level: whereas CAP was determined to shift the focus onto the latter, and root Christian discipleship and witness as acting and speaking from margins to centre, the public impact of Church statements on national political issues still held – perhaps disproportionate – impact.

³⁵ This had particular political significance: at the time of the Declaration, a series of statements had been made by government ministers denying the existence of poverty as a social reality; so to proclaim the continuing and worsening state of social inequality, and to present a statement emanating from the heart of poverty, was itself a radical act.

³⁶ Church Action on Poverty, *Hearing the cry of the poor* (Manchester: CAP, 1991).

individualism. It admits that 'Poverty did not begin in 1979', but argues that it has acquired a 'special vehemence' in that time, due to a breakdown in consensus and workings of deregulated market. The second section, entitled 'We Believe . . .' gives theological rationale for CAP's stance. Here, the centrality of the Kingdom is reiterated; but the call to discipleship has a sharper edge than *Faith in the city*. All those who follow Jesus commit themselves to the realization of the Kingdom here on earth. God's spirit speaks through the cries of the poor, restoring our social priorities and breaking the power of false illusions of money, power and status. Thirdly, 'From Faith to Action' attempts to connect theological claims with social responsibility: 'The true end of any social order .. is to embody the Kingdom of God in human affairs.' Signs of the Kingdom will be: equal citizenship regardless of race, class or gender; hope for the future; basic needs of all are met. A renewed social vision must be informed by the 'practical wisdom' of those who seek mutuality, respect and justice.

The theology of the Declaration is perhaps less nuanced than that of *Faith in the city*: but it is intentionally designed to give the bold outlines of a moral and political stance. It is also, after all, the work of the converted. Those consulted were committed to the work of CAP, and this meant that their statements were generated from the concrete realities of marginalization and poverty, although it offers little space for equivocation or qualification. It is perhaps best regarded as essentially a credo for the anti-poverty lobby within the churches: a collective summons, a rallying-cry; and perhaps, and like the creeds of the early Church, should be taken as a statement of collective solidarity, a means of establishing the boundaries of the faithful, rather than as a substantive statement of belief.

CAP's commitment to usher to the centre of public concerns the wisdom of those on the margins was further developed in its next project, Action of the Church Towards a New Social Vision (ACTS). Again, the impetus came from the sense of an intransigent government, and a commitment to 'doing theology in the community'. Much of the development work was conducted amongst community groups in East Manchester, via a process of excavating and articulating their opinions on housing, health care, political participation and spirituality.³⁷ Out of the stories and accounts of resistance and renewal would come, it was believed, the values and visions from which the marginalized communities could act to forge alternative realities.

³⁷ See Marycatherine Dunne et al., *Stitched up! action for health in Ancoats*, (Manchester: Church Action on Poverty, 1993); J. Dale and C. Russell (eds), *Experience encounters faith: action of the Church towards a new social vision* (London: Christian Action Journal, Spring 1993).

ACTS is therefore working on a model of 'doing theology' founded on a synthesis of theology and social analysis that owes a debt to the value-commitments and methods of Liberation Theology and Critical Theory, with the intention to reconstruct theological language and the moral discourse of public policy in order that it may reflect more authentically the 'real' interests of the poor.

Thus, ACTS publications record the experiences and stories of community groups, in the belief that the everyday reveals the Kingdom. However, the process has moved on from ACUPA: by now, the institutional church is practically invisible, except perhaps as a penitent observer. Traditional or 'academic' theology no longer provides explicit terms of reference, although of course the values which inform the 'exercises' and consultative processes by which ACTS elicits (or constructs?) the words of its informants are implicitly those of empowerment, liberation and incarnation. However, there is a kind of mute consensus that talk of God – at least as transcendent and Other – must be banished. Any recourse to theological discourse can only refer to the respect in which life has ultimate meaning and purpose. God is only meaningful as wholly immanent: present, but seemingly synonymous, with the purposeful struggles of the poor and marginalized to 'name' their experiences and aspirations.

Critical questions may need to be asked about the extent to which, in adopting such a stance, projects such as ACTS jettison any distinctively Christian character – or indeed, whether that matters. A 'local' theology may emerge from the visions and experiences of a local community; but does it necessarily also need to bear some recognizable resemblance to the historical institutions and truth-claims of a more universal Christian community? Would it be possible for the authenticity of a 'local' theology to be assessed not simply by its faithfulness to its context but by reference to historical or biblical tradition, and still retain its integrity? There may be a danger of local theologies collapsing into a liberationist incantationalism which cannot differentiate between world and Kingdom, not so much because of its corruption by power and establishment, but because of its total identification with specific human projects. As many commentators have noted, appeal to the notion of 'community' is often regarded as self-evidently wholesome; but it can also conceal self-interest and introversion. Without wishing to decry the value and scrupulousness of the ACTS endeavour, therefore, it seems important to ask whether a local theology needs a point of reference beyond the horizons of its own community so as to avoid itself becoming a self-serving 'ideology'.

ACTS's successor project, 'Local People, National Voice' further exemplified the commitment to grass-roots campaigning

and solidarity with those most badly affected by poverty. It aimed to collect evidence and insights from local contexts in advance of convening a national 'hearing' on poverty, to be held in 1996. It is envisaged that campaigns will take place at three levels of action: local groups, regional meetings and national.

Once more, there is emphasis on the creation of partnerships between people from different sections of society – of listening to people in the midst of poverty, of gaining accurate information and creating the right circumstances in which the powerless and silenced can gain a voice. However, the initial campaigning literature of LPNV seems more clearly directed towards the churches; its aim appears one of prompting Christian responsibility to act in response to 'the cry of the poor':

The structures of power, wealth creation and distribution must be changed so that the rights bestowed on us all, by virtue of being created in the image and likeness of our God, are restored to each and everyone. *This challenge is just as strong today and should lead us actively to align ourselves with the low-paid, unemployed, homeless and other oppressed groups... We will become truly Christian as we work in partnership, to proclaim good news to the poor.*³⁸

Another local initiative to Greater Manchester whose origin lay in the response to *Faith in the city* is an organization called 'Linking Up', which came into existence in 1989. The aim of Linking Up is 'to help the churches play a more effective role in regenerating the economic life of Urban Priority Areas.' It does this by providing a variety of services for local 'self-help' projects: training, financial advice, organizational development, business planning and commercial sponsorship.

As a project promoted by the Church Urban Fund, Linking Up represents two significant departures or developments from *Faith in the city*. First, Linking Up does not work exclusively with the Christian churches, but with a variety of faith-communities throughout the UPAs of Britain.³⁹ The second point to note is the extent to which the assumptions of ACUPA in the mid-80s, that the economic regeneration of UPAs would be largely the responsibility of central or local government, has been superceded. In the 1990s, the agents of the Church Urban Fund – such as Linking Up – seem to work quite happily within a very different economic environment, in which local initiatives are very publicly promoted as 'community partnerships' between businesses, local

³⁸ Church Action on Poverty, *Local people, national voice* (Manchester: CAP, 1993), 1.

³⁹ It works with a Muslim project in Bradford providing literacy and information technology training for young Muslim women; another project in a Hindu temple in Leeds promotes a variety of educational and business schemes. Further material available from Linking Up, 27 Blackfriars Road, Manchester M3 7AQ.

authorities and voluntary funding. In this respect Linking Up is much more typical of urban regeneration activity in the British city of the 1990s, and reflects a greater degree of collaboration between the voluntary sector – including the churches – local authorities and private enterprise than *Faith in the city* ever envisaged.⁴⁰ So the Church Urban Fund, as the main project agency of Faith in the City, has concentrated on programmes that direct resources to local communities and enable them to build up initiatives that equip local people with skills and resources which will – it is hoped – take them from dependency to empowerment.⁴¹ Meanwhile, however, the decade since *Faith in the city* has been one of a growing socio-economic divide. Whilst the better off members of society have increased their share of national wealth, the poorest are now worse off. The gap in earnings between richest and poorest in Britain is wider now than at any time since records began, in 1886.⁴²

Since Augustine, Christian social thought has always had to compromise between the earthly city and the City of God, of seeking ways of affirming the world as the arena of divine revelation and salvation whilst retaining some critical distance. Theologies of the city risk endorsing the 'signs of the times' without fully appreciating the provisionality and partiality of even such secular visions – as the anachronism of Harvey Cox's vision now show. Yet for those Christian communities who do see their vocation as one of solidarity with wider society, the challenge remains of how to maintain a credible and authentic presence in wider society without compromising a distinctive and authoritative Christian perspective on human destiny and social organization. One criticism of *Faith in the city* was that it failed to recognize the extent of the breakdown of social consensus by 1985; not only did it over-estimate the government's will to intervene, but it also held a mistake and wildly inflated estimate of the ability of the Church itself to construct a viable alternative to free market models of urban renewal. However, other evidence suggests that *Faith in the city* was received warmly by many urban priority communities, and that the 'residual religiosity' of the English remained sufficiently strong to ensure that the Church

⁴⁰ One project that has gained assistance from Linking Up is based at St Wilfrid's Church in Hulme, a public housing estate on the fringes of the University of Manchester. 'Firmstart' is a managed workspace house in a redundant Roman Catholic church of small business units, employing local people and offering training and financial support for new enterprises.

⁴¹ However, the Church Urban Fund has been criticized for colluding with programmes of urban regeneration without being sufficiently critical of wider economic policies. See Eric James, 'Seven devils and the Church Urban Fund', *Crucible*, March–April 1991, 68–71.

⁴² The Borrie Commission, 1994, 28.

still retains a credibility and influence in relation to the contemporary city.⁴³

Yet the contradictions of ACUPA still persist: an established Church whose active membership stands at less than 1% of the urban population; an institution that owes its very existence to political and civil compromise espousing a radical vision of an alternative human community; a Church which regards itself as an advocate of the poor and yet owes its financial security to the management of a sizeable investment portfolio; a theology that speaks the language of scandal, vulnerability and *kenosis* translated into policies relevant to Government and nation; a Church struggling to articulate a distinctive theology rooted in the specific life and context of a local community, simultaneously claiming that inter-faith dialogue is the most important and fruitful challenge for the urban Church. Such contradictions may ultimately either signal the death of the institutional Church, or else herald the birth of new forms of (Christian) faith and practice in UPAs.

Christian social thought must always be dynamic, forged at the intersection of economic and social reality and Christian faith and practices. *Faith in the city* represents one such response to a changing context, even though at times it founders on the contradictions of a State Church, predominantly middle-class in membership, attempting to 'keep faith' with those most badly-hit by an increasingly polarized society. Whatever the fault-lines of division and fragmentation, whatever the scale of contrast between wealth and dispossession, the city of the year 2000 will still be a place of ambivalence and contradiction, and certainly a place where the old certainties and institutions no longer hold sway. The question is whether contemporary social theology and Christian *praxis* has the resources and commitment to make a difference in that context.

⁴³ Archbishop of Canterbury's Advisory Group on Urban Priority Areas, *Living faith in the city* (London: Church House Publishing, 1990); H. Clark, *The Church under Thatcher*, 105-6.

