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1984

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So much hoo-ha! So many pundits! 'Much ado about nothing'! Or is it? Even if we are already heartily sick and tired of the Orwellian memorabilia, analyses, and comparative predictions, we must still admit that somehow or other George Orwell has captivated the interest and concerns of modern people. His account of a society in 1984 still provokes strong reactions, disclaimers and responses from every sphere of the political and literary world. So why should theology be immune?

Our world of 1984 seems at first glance a long way from Orwell's predictions. The drabness of a society at war, with all the evocations of the late forties, is far removed from the variety and consumer-mad world of the Europe of the eighties. Nevertheless, there are echoes of that fictional world which do ring true. It was a world divided into major power blocks which dominated the affairs of all by their endless war. Our world is a world of power groupings at war, of both the cold and hot variety, where the governments alter policy with apparently little reference to most of us. It was a world where Big Brother dominated, and every home and room, street and square had the telescreen to enable Big Brother to keep on watching everyone. Most of us are dominated in a very similar way by screens that inhabit the corners of our sitting rooms, bedrooms and even kitchens. With the advent of cable television, we are no longer thinking of one-way communication into the homes of people, but a responsive situation where genuine interaction and participation can take place. One is reminded of an awful American programme where families in deep distress over some family problem, emotional upset, or personal trauma present their situation to an audience who are then invited to vote on which advice the family should follow. There is a psychiatrist, a clergyman, and an astrologer. The audience, like the family, are encouraged to take their pick. Soon, instead of experiencing problems for ourselves, we shall be able to spend all our time watching and advising others in their traumas.

The common interpretation of *1984*[1] is of a struggle by an individual against a society which seeks to destroy individuality, to control the thoughts and actions of men and women, and which requires conformity at all costs. The pressure of our secular world seems to be pushing us all in that direction. Yet there is almost an equal and opposite force which rebels against every and all authority, delights in being different, and holds individual freedom as the ultimate for us all. The very force of the counter-reaction seems to highlight the intensity of the pressure to conform.

Another common feature between the world of Orwell and our own situation is the widespread abuse of language and truth. The two go hand in hand in the literary account, and seem to do so in our world. It is not just the extreme difficulty many folk have in believing what politicians say, but increasing doubt about the objectivity, honesty, and fair-mindedness of the reporting and comment in newspapers, television and the world of the media in general. Our language, and the reality which it expresses, are both in danger of being eroded, in terms of meaning and value and in the capacity to do their work, by our devaluation of the coinage of speech and communication.

But enough of that pseudo-Orwellian analysis! At least the editor may feel that some kind of justice has been done to the original notion of an article on *1984* by the meagre attempt to draw a few parallels between Orwell's book and our present situation. There are those with greater insight who are far better qualified to do that kind of analysis. But there is still a value in reflecting on *1984* for Christian men and women. In the rest of the piece we shall try to do two things. We shall try to look at the world in which we live, and the impact of that world on our faith and life as Christians. We shall then try to look forward to the issues that face the church in the rest of the eighties and to suggest some tentative lines of response to those issues.

Our context, and the content of theological reflection

If we are able to move beyond the literary reflection on *1984* to ask what issues face us, then we have moved too quickly to the themes without due regard to the context in which our theological work is done. What Orwellmania has done for us is to encourage an honest look at where we are up to as a society. The politicians use that reflection as a key to unlock the major issues facing western democracy. The literary critic uses such thinking as a means to enquire into the role of the novel and futuristic writing within a society. The clergy, laity and theologians (if they form a third group) ought to do likewise. What issues face the church today, and what is the context in which such issues are to be dealt with and overcome?

Our context in the West is that of a secularized society. Our cultural setting is that of a scientific, instrumentalist kind. Theology has not been immune from the impact of secularization. We suffer from the same disease as our fellows. The church and the Christian are affected by a transition from a culture where the beliefs, activities and institutions presupposed beliefs of a Christian kind, to a society and culture where the beliefs, activities and institutions are based on atheistic views. Western society has been, and is being, effectively de-christianized, de-divinized and de-demonized. That means that the categories of the 'sacred', 'mystery', 'holiness', 'transcendence' and 'otherness' are increasingly foreign and mystifying to the modern

person, who has an empirical, pragmatic grasp of reality. This outlook is accompanied by pluralism. We are confronted by a variety of competing world-views and presuppositional frameworks. With the presence of others within our culture—other religions, other races, other cultures, other moralities—everything is open to question, especially the areas of life which traditionally have been accepted in an uncritical way. For Christian theology, the presence of other religions, with their counter-claims of revelation, uniqueness, moral standards and religious experience, sows seeds of doubt in the minds of theologian and believer alike. To this must be added the philosophical and practical challenge of relativism, which suggests that meaning, truth and falsity are simply relative to a particular culture at a particular time. There are no absolutes or universals. Morality and religious truth are culturally dependent and can therefore have only a relative truth and authority. Understanding can only be found within a limited context, and no final judgement can be made between different cultures, attitudes or ways of life.

One classic response and move that may be made to the challenges of pluralism and relativism is that of *reductionism*. If everything is open to challenge, then a tactical withdrawal, reducing the number of hostages to fortune and only defending what is essential, seems a highly sensible manœuvre. This spirit of reductionism is supported by the scientific temper of our culture. The critical, analytical style and practice of science tends to move from the holistic and complex to the simple and irreducible by a process of reduction. It is interesting to note how the second wave of the Enlightenment—Marx, Freud and the like—are interpreted in this kind of 'scientific' and reductionist way. Their followers suggest that everything may be interpreted without remainder in terms of economic laws or infantile experience. It is that the bare essentials are captured, and nothing of importance omitted, which offers apparent security and a tool for the analysis of all else. This kind of move has great attraction for the theologian. It looks like a move towards greater certainty and an immunity from criticism. It seems that we can arrive at a basic bedrock for faith, and that no one can ever shake that irreducible core. This is exactly what the 'demythologists' and 'mythographers' are claiming in their work, as typified by *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Yet one must wonder about both the wisdom and the likely success of such a venture in principle. The prophets and leaders of Israel, Jesus, and the early apostles, were never immune from criticism and are all too humanly portrayed in times of doubt and uncertainty. Does not the very nature of faith remove *ab initio* any absolute certainty in the sense of that which is beyond all possible critique? Furthermore, it is odd when a view which purports to say something of vital importance is immune from criticism. If there is nothing to be said against a view, it is not clear what may be said in favour of such a view. It removes all

possibility of the refining of a view and the development of understanding of a position. It is a static closed picture of irrelevance rather than a dynamic account of that which can transform and change.

Given the reality of these features of secularization, and the impact of instrumentalism, relativism and reductionism on our culture, and thus on the practice and content of theology, it is vital for theology to respond. The first step is to be critically aware of the normative role our cultural forms may exercise on our view and interpretation of Scripture, of the person and work of Christ, and indeed of all doctrine; on the life of the church, and on the pattern of living of believers. A second step is to ask whether such cultural baggage and frames of reference are necessarily the case. There seems to be too ready an acceptance of the force of modern culture as necessary and appropriate, without any real question. Are we inevitably subject to cultural conditioning? Are we unable to clarify our cultural presuppositions? Are we not able to test such presuppositions and make decisions to change, adapt or modify these presuppositions in the light of other sets? Particularly here, we might look for ways in which the biblical record will act as normative, and as a means of judging the appropriateness or otherwise of any cultural presuppositions.

The liberal critic proceeds thus. He argues that the biblical writers had their own presuppositions. It is difficult for twentieth-century people to understand what they were really saying and meaning. Even if it is possible for us to discern that meaning and essence, it is framed in such a foreign context that we are unable to share these old-fashioned presuppositions. We are modern people and therefore must use modern criteria. These modern criteria become the standard by which the biblical accounts and God's revelation are to be judged.

There are, however, a number of problems with this. Is it fair to assume that we are unable to understand and accept other presuppositions than our own because we are totally certain of our own set? Are we so sure that modern presuppositions are the correct ones? Are we so certain that we know what these 'modern' presuppositions are? There is a tension within our modern world. While it is true that modern science continues to have a vast impact on our knowledge and understanding, there is equally a reaction to 'scientism'. Existentialism and existentialist theology, which seek to demythologize in order to discover the true essence of theological and biblical statements, proclaim that a personal, non-systematic, existential grasp of truth is proper to the nature of truth and to the nature of people. Theologians are guilty of drawing both from the scientific and the existential emphases without realizing the tension between the two. This tension must call in question the 'uniformity' of modern

cultural presuppositions. There is much greater variety within our western culture than is clear from an analysis of theological reflection on that culture.

It is also doubtful whether the implications drawn from these presuppositions are necessarily the case. In contrasting scientific accounts with other 'mythical' accounts (like the biblical stories—so goes the suggestion), it is assumed that the scientific account is *not* mythical. The more careful admit that this is not the case, yet argue that the scientific 'myths' are more appropriate than the biblical ones. This allows scientific models a greater power than most scientists would claim for them. In picturing the nature of phenomena, scientists freely use atomic or sub-atomic 'myths' and models. The scientists themselves make no claims that this is how things are, but rather that this is a way of describing how things behave under certain conditions. This pragmatic, flexible approach seems much less of a threat and more muted in its claims than the scientific models described by the theologians. The danger is that the theologian may misunderstand the scientist and his claims, and in the misapprehension allow the scientific world-view a normative role it does not claim and cannot sustain. Some would go further, and argue that to seek to fit theology to the scientific world-view is to fail to do justice to theology. Its practices and forms are more those of the humanities than of the sciences.

Alternatively, a robust few are happy to affirm the scientific world-views (properly understood in their muted form) and argue that there is a proper science of theology which is based on the same fundamental principle as all scientific knowledge: that to be rational is to be conditioned by the nature of the object. This is what the true theologian does in his approach to the object of theology, God himself. Our argument here is to question whether we have a proper grasp of the nature of modern culture, and in particular whether scientific forms of investigation can or do pose the kinds of threat which seem to force theologians along the path of reductionism.

If we look at much of the unease concerning the doctrine of the incarnation, we see an unease concerning the possibility of divine interaction with, and involvement in, the historical and natural processes. Modern science rules out an interventionist God, it is claimed. But traditional Christianity, based on the Bible, finds no embarrassment in talk of God's activity in history, in nature, and in the lives of people. Indeed, to understand any and all of these, reference to God is essential. We would need to be very clear what scientific presuppositions are being applied here such as to exclude God from activity in his universe. It is too easy to talk about science in general, and thus fail to discover that no particular scientific model could so operate without destroying its own status as a model and its claims to be scientific.

Even if it were possible to specify some detailed scientific presuppositions which are the very essence of modern culture, and to contrast those with the presuppositions of biblical writers, this of itself does not imply that there is no one way of looking at the world which is more correct than another. Nor indeed does it necessarily imply that the modern world-view is obviously more correct. Such a judgement rests not so much on the difference in frameworks, as in the belief that humanity's judgement and understanding are developing and thus are 'more correct' now than in any previous time. This need not be the case and requires proof for it to be asserted.

There seems, too, a hesitation to recognize that we can reflect on, criticize, and change our presuppositions. The essayists in *The Myth of God Incarnate* seem to believe that the poor biblical writers had to accept their world-view and we, fortunate enlightened souls, have to accept our world-view. This is too far too static a view of presuppositions. We are able to specify our presuppositions and to reflect critically upon them. While we cannot criticize them all at once, it is possible to criticize each and every one in turn and to revise them. The very fact of the fundamental changes in presuppositions in any kind of political, scientific or religious conversion shows that this is clearly no case of special pleading. It is a necessary fact of life for new knowledge to be discovered and present mistakes corrected. It may be that the West needs the help of the Two-Thirds world in providing critical tools for reflection on our western outlook.

Pluralism and relativism

Two further features of our context, which are vital in their impact upon the church and Christianity, are pluralism and relativism. The presence of other religions, and the special roles of their religious founders, books and communities, are held to constitute a set of fundamental challenges to the claims of uniqueness for Christ, the Bible and the church. It is claimed that tolerance is the only solution to this problem. Mutual tolerance is the proper safeguard against misguided arrogance. There is, however, a genuine possibility that those who live and work in those pluralistic cultures where Christianity is a minority religion may be able to propound a full-blooded Christianity in spite of, yet in relation to, Islam, Buddhism and traditional religions. If this is the case, then the supposed threat from other cultures to our western theological understanding is to some extent dissolved. Then the suggested cure of tolerance would become the antidote to a non-existent disease. But behind this, there is puzzlement about how the simple fact of plurality is held to act as a brake on the affirmation of any one view as correct. The fact of many opinions does not, in itself, mean that there is no one true view, as my classes of students are well aware. Some, like Goulder, seek to analyse the Christology of the New Testament by

reference to Jewish, Greek and Samaritan redeemer myths. It may be true (but it is by no means universally accepted by Inter-Testamental and New Testament scholars) that there are close parallels between these myths, and that the New Testament writers used these myths to express their understanding of Christ. But this is not the same as to assert that Christ is therefore of the same standing as the other 'redeemers'. The genetic fallacy is at work here, where the explanation of the origin does not explain the full essence and content of a view.

Similarly, there is a danger of too uncritical acceptance of relativism. A totally relativistic claim, that everything is relative to a particular culture and time, is subject to its own test and scrutiny. The judgement that 'everything is relative' is itself relative to a particular culture and time. Thus to establish its primacy is to go beyond the proper claims of relativism. Such an attempt leads to contradictions. If 'everything is relative', and this absolutely so, we find that everything is not relative, for we have one absolute which affects everything. If, in contrast, everything is not relative, then the strong threat from relativism is mere shadow, and a proper caution to interpret things in their appropriate contexts.

The relativist must go further. He must also establish that no facet of humanity or of the world continues through the various cultures and times. Such an exercise and proof would need to be very exhaustive and thorough, and many—Christian and non-Christian alike—look to the nature of people, morality, religion and the nature of the world as the ground of genuine continuity between and among cultures. If, however, it could be established that relativism were correct, then it is important for the relativist (and those who seek to reduce or adapt Christianity to meet that challenge) to realize that the relativist knife cuts more than one way. The objectivity of theology and its claims may be questioned, but so, too, may those of science and modern culture. One cannot stop being relativistic at whatever point one chooses. Theology is in no worse (and no better) a position than any other discipline, if relativism is correct. We certainly do not find every period of history and every cultural setting equally difficult to understand, and we can identify common features with our own culture and time. We might fruitfully examine why particular cultures and times seem especially difficult for modern people to grasp. It is hard to see what is so extremely difficult in the cultural setting of first-century Palestine, that we are so hesitant in understanding that culture, while apparently readily accepting much earlier, but equally 'foreign', cultures of Greece, China and many others.

Reductionism—the cure?

If we are faced with a pluralistic and relativistic challenge, it is extremely tempting to imagine that the cure is to find some irreducible core or minimum which is absolutely certain and which

cannot be doubted. Such a minimum would be immune from criticism, and thus Christianity would be safe for ever. Sadly, we know from the paradoxes of Zeno that, while in theory we may continue to cut slices from a cake, leaving some cake still to be cut *ad infinitum*, in practice there comes a point where there is, in fact, no more cake. Reductionism likewise in the end leads to nothing. The reductionist protests that there is something left. If we apply this to Christology, we are asking how far it is possible to reduce the account of the nature of Christ and yet retain some account which is in recognizable continuity with orthodox views of Jesus. Unless the irreducible minimum were an absolutely certain base, the move would have been pointless. If the line between scientific and other myths cannot be clearly drawn, greater certainty will not come if one moves to a purely scientifically acceptable account. Moreover, the weakness of reductionism is that it reduces complexity to a single, simple facet and thus does violence to the fulness and true manifold nature of what is experienced. Simple answers are only appropriate for simple questions.

Our aim, then, has been to reflect on our context in 1984 and to begin to enter into a critical debate with the cultural assumptions within our western context which seem to play a normative role on the church, Christianity, and the practice of theology. Paul's advice is as sound as ever: 'Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould' (Rom. 12:2).

The issues facing the church of 1984

Distinctiveness

It is all too common, in evangelistic or apologetic settings, to meet the criticism that there is no basic difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. What is being said is that in the actual practice and living of life, there is no distinction between believers and unbelievers. Their frames of reference may be radically different, but their lives are remarkably similar. This should cause us to ponder and to ask very seriously whether there is a distinctive Christian life-style, and how we should show that life-style today.

Biblical authority

The challenge of the twentieth-century secular world is no more keenly felt than in relation to Scripture. This attack rests on relativism. There are, in fact, two separate issues at stake. The first is in the realm of *interpretation*, the second at the level of *application* and *authority*. The initial challenge from relativism is that each biblical passage was written in and to a particular context. Its meaning is therefore to be found solely in that context, and may be understood only by knowledge of, and reference to, that context. The second challenge is that, even if it is possible to arrive at some clear

content in the light of the cultural context which has a meaning we may understand today, we must still judge the acceptability or otherwise of that principle in the light of modern culture and understanding. All too often, in practice, Scripture is judged by modern culture, and biblical principles are set aside because of some modern insight and knowledge. We need to work harder at discovering a right means of interpretation and application for the Scriptures.

Authority in the church

There is a crisis of authority within the church. This may be highlighted in the questioning by ministers and people of the role of the ordained ministry, and of patterns of leadership in the church. There is a tension felt between freedom and authority, structures and patterns. Is our modern stress on freedom simply a hangover from a Renaissance-Enlightenment view of man, or is it a fundamental biblical principle? What are right leadership, delegation of leadership, and authority structures and patterns for the 1980s?

Discipline

This is a hot potato in many denominations, but raises fundamental questions. Given the modern understandings of responsibility and self-fulfilment, how are we to respond to the breakdown of discipline in society? At the theological level, it is no longer clear that there is a sharp line between orthodoxy and heresy. In our desire to be tolerant and to fulfil the ideal of modernization, at the same time as avoiding the threat of the witch-hunt, we may have allowed to a secular moral theme a normative role and function in relation to the Christian judgement of ideas, theological expressions, and interpretations of Christianity. In the realm of Christian behaviour, it is important to be clear on the role of the Christian community in the fulfilling of Christian standards and the pattern of response to the failure to keep those standards. How may discipline be practised in the Christian community without a degeneration of morality into legalism and the legalistic application of norms?

The interrelation of public and private life

There are two related issues at stake here. The first is an issue for the 'established' churches. They are part of the institutional realm of society, but there is a price to be paid for this inclusion in the institution. The relation and confusion of the church with the government, law and institutional powers means identification with those aspects of the public sphere, and a limiting of effective communication with those who stand over and against that macro-world. The recent continuing debate over the church's attitude towards the remarriage of state divorcees highlights the tension for the clergy and the 'established' church. No matter what the church seems to decide, there will be little effectiveness or influence of the

church on the institutions of society. One wonders where the place and reality of an effective prophetic challenge to society lie for the church. All too often the church is in the business of 'fire-engine' theology, simply responding to the presented needs, rather than getting to the roots of the issues. The church's response is conditioned by the needs, and gives the impression of the role of the church as a need-meeter and nothing more. The church requires to take the initiative, and to set the debate on her terms rather than the world's terms.

Christian Education

Christian education was dependent not only on the church, but was reinforced and had its chief impetus from the home and in the school. Theological colleges and seminaries carried on this process in preparation for ministry. We now face in Britain the end of genuine religious education in schools. This may well be in some new statutory policy, but is certainly true in practice, given the poor motivation and standard of religious teaching in most schools. The family setting—once a bastion for the teaching of Christian values—is increasingly rarely a setting for Christian worship and teaching. Many of the courses offered in our theological colleges are in danger of missing the point. They were designed for Christian young people, biblically informed and theologically discerning. The students today are largely converted heathens, with no Christian background, little Christian experience, no sense of Christian culture, and no familiarity with biblical ideas and Christian themes. The students are secularized and have neither the discernment of, nor the digestion for, a theological diet which is expressed in a mould foreign to their own framework and experience. What is an appropriate Christian education for 1984 in the family, school and theological college setting?

A recipe for hope?

It may well seem that the net effect of looking at 1984 is to end up with a catalogue of problems and worries for the church. Indeed it would be foolish to underestimate the seriousness of the kinds of issues facing Christian people today. What is crucial, however, is the attitude we adopt towards these issues. We may feel that the task is too great, the threat too difficult, and our resources too weak. Rubbish! Every problem is yet another opportunity for the grace of God to work. Every difficulty facing the church is an opportunity to discern God's will and direction, and in his power to overcome. We are brought back to the reality of God, and to the good news of Christ at work in our world and in us all by the Spirit of God.

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NOTE

1 G. Orwell, *1984* (Secker & Warburg, London 1949 [latest edition 1984]).