

A Politics of Place?

It is widely agreed that Christianity does not endorse any one kind of polity. Karl Barth, for example, routinely argues that view. I want to see if I can argue a contrary view, and do it in the unlikely form of arguing for a place based politics. This will allow me to say something about David Cameron's idea of 'The Big Society', which makes a nod to localism. My argument will have three steps.

Economics and democracy

I first want to argue that without economic democracy we do not have democracy at all and that we should have democracy.

You can straightaway object that there is no reason to suppose that Christianity really has any commitment to democracy. After all, Christians argued that monarchy was God given for well over a thousand years. Karl Barth thought there was a 'nihil' towards democracy in Christianity, but no more.¹ To this I reply that we have to ask what follows from the fact that all humans are created in the image of God, that, as the Christian socialists argued, we are made in the image of the Triune God, 'in whom there is one perfect equality'. What O'Donovan calls the great tradition of Christian political reflection accepted as an axiom that society was hierarchically ordered. I would claim that such an axiom rested on an idea of God which had not sufficiently wrestled with the revelation in Christ, where the master is the slave and lordship is service. Precisely this case is what Dave argued in *Deity and Domination*. If we do wrestle with that revelation then, it seems to me, we have to have a politics which reflects the fact that we all share in the image of God, and this will be some form of democracy, because only in such a system is that fact honoured.

But does democracy include economic democracy? The division between politics and economics departments in our universities reflects a deep seated view of the difference between them which seems to think we do not. Oliver O'Donovan can write two books on political theology with only a few sentences referring to economics. I suspect that this division owes something to the fact that only between 1930 and 1989 did we have a choice of economic systems, the command economy and the so-called 'free market'. Before that, though there was a choice of polities – between democracy, monarchy or aristocracy, as Aristotle argued, or between monarchy and republicanism – there was not a similar choice between economies. Trade and industry could be regulated and taxed, but there was not a sense of a whole other way of doing things. The distinction between politics and economics was strengthened in the nineteenth century when the assumption is made that economics is a value free science and that it has nothing to do with evaluative questions. A.M.C. Waterman argues that this assumption only became common after Malthus and was first argued by Newman's tutor, Richard Whateley.

¹ K. Barth, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community' *Against the Stream* (London: SCM 1954 p.44)

Whateley's methodology included the assumptions that scientific or secular knowledge is sharply distinct from theological or sacred knowledge; that the former comes by experience and the latter comes by faith which is 'spiritual discernment of the strictly religious truths contained in 'revelation'; and that therefore 'political economy attempts to answer questions of what is, leaving strictly alone questions of what ought to be: per se, an economist can give no advice about public policy.'² The converse, that politicians should not try to interfere with the economy, is the conclusion drawn by the Chicago school, and the doctrine under which we have lived for the last forty years. It is, of course, a form of false consciousness. As Elmar Altvater insists, the invisible hand of the market has to be supported by the visible hand of state intervention, and both require the "third hand" of a network of social and economic institutions.³ Or as the New York journalist Thomas Friedman, in his encomium on the Bush economic doctrine writes, 'The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist, and the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon alley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps'.⁴

The assumption of the separation of politics and economics is odd given the perfectly obvious fact that politics do in fact change as economic conditions change. Thus in this country monarchy was taken for granted in a situation where the main power base lay in relatively few powerful landed gentry, able to exact tribute from their workforce, but as the power of the towns grew so the balance of power shifted to Parliament, and this led to the contest we know as the civil war. The change in Parliament in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries follows the change from mercantile to industrial capitalism. Parliament becomes dominated not by the landed interest but by the industrial interest. But heavy industry needed the factory system, and this gave the opportunity for the workforce to organise. Labour politics followed from this fact, even though the first union was that of agricultural workers. To argue this is not to opt for economic determinism but it is to disavow the conceit that politics and economics operate in separate spheres and can be both theorised and practised quite independently.

If that is the case, where are we now? By common consent the most important economic force of the past forty years has been globalization and the replacement of industrial by finance capitalism.⁵ John Dillon argues that if one concedes that financial markets largely rule the world, then all that is left for governments and central banks to do is to try to please these markets by pursuing the policies the bond traders demand: low inflation enforced through monetarist policies of high real interest rates and high unemployment, and policies of fiscal austerity. 'In essence', David Korten comments, 'this means abandoning the most basic principles of democracy'.⁶

He does not define democracy, but let me suggest that what we mean by it is that situation where a polity's citizenry takes responsibility for its own affairs. In a

² A.M.C. Waterman *Political Economy and Christian Theology since the Enlightenment* (London: Macmillan 2004) p. 140/1

³ E.Altvater *The Future of the Market* London: Verso 1993 p. 72

⁴ T.Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, (London: Harper Collins 2000) p 464-475.

⁵ David Korten *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford: Kumarian 1995) p. 269

⁶ David Korten *The Post Corporate World* (West Hartford: Kumarian 1999) p. 163

democracy, L'état c'est nous. Alongside the growth of globalization has been the widely accepted distinction between the state and civil society, but we should not take this for granted. It suggests an alienation between state and its citizens. Of course there was such a gap in Stalinism, and there is also a democratic deficit in so-called representative democracy, but the assumption that 'the state' is something quite apart from the citizenry is deeply disempowering. It invites the abandonment of responsibility.

But what affairs are the citizenry responsible for? All affairs: for foreign relations, so called defence, the making of laws, but also trade, production, energy, transport – all the things which we group under economics. If we are to take democracy seriously, Korten argues 'decisions regarding economic policies and choices must be firmly in the hands of a country's citizens'.⁷ Economic democracy, then, might involve cooperatives of the Mondragon type, it might involve worker representation in the Board room, but more fundamentally, I am suggesting it means accepting the principle that there is not an independent realm, operating according to unchallengeable rules of the market, which a country's citizenry simply cannot touch. That might seem obvious, but it has been routinely denied by the IMF for the past forty years, which has policed economic policies of sovereign states in the name of an orthodoxy every bit as antiquated, and every bit as dogmatic, as that which brought Galileo to the Inquisition. So for example in Greece at the moment the government has been told that it must "present [a] detailed privatisation plan with dates and revenue guidelines" by the end of the year. Under plans announced in the summer, the privatisation will include the railways, electricity and gas sectors, water services for two major cities, the post office, and numerous other state enterprises. Petros Kosmas, lecturer at the Varna Free University of Cyprus, comments "Greece has been obliged to instigate the most severe austerity package in our modern economic history. ... At this cost, there is an acute danger that the resulting recession in Greece will lead to the very situation it was meant to avoid – i.e. a default." In the Ukraine trade unions complain that the IMF deal their country has agreed "cynically interferes in a sovereign state's domestic policy" and that the conditions should be renegotiated. In Latvia, the Harmony Centre party, leading in the polls before an early October election, has called for rewriting the terms of the Baltic country's IMF deal. Even the country's central bank governor has called the IMF-required privatisation plans "unforgiveable".⁸ It is this economic orthodoxy which has to be abandoned. In a democracy everything is up for discussion; the people, not the banks, or institutions like the IMF, rule.

Economics and place in Scripture

I now want to go on and ask about Scriptural teaching on economics, and in particular what this has to say about place.

Ched Myers argues that there are three axioms in biblical economics:

1. That the world as created by God is abundant, with enough for everyone –provided that human communities restrain their appetites and live within limits;

⁷ Korten *Post Corporate World* p.193

⁸ Bretton Woods Project 30 September 2010

2. That disparities in wealth and power are not 'natural' but the result of human sin, and must be mitigated within the community of faith through the regular practice of redistribution;
3. That the prophetic message calls people to the practice of such redistribution, and is thus characterized as 'good news' to the poor.⁹

The mechanism for redistribution to which Myers refers, 'the Jubilee', was not confined to ancient Israel, but was practised both in Greece under Solon and throughout the Ancient Near East and represented the experience that growing debt levels made an economy unworkable. As compared to Solon's *seisachtheia*, or shaking off of burdens, the distinctive thing about the Levitical proposals was that they were envisaged as recurring. In other words, the likelihood that impossible levels of debt would constantly recur was taken for granted. In Myers' words the debt relief proposals 'were not offered as an unattainable ideal but as a practical hedge against the inevitability of the stratification of wealth and power within human societies. The social model for free tribal Israel was periodically to deconstruct debt, land alienation and bond servitude'.¹⁰

A welfare state funded by taxation is a model of a redistributive society, based on the assumption that every citizen is responsible for the weal and woe of every other. It is a jubilee proposal. In Myers terms it assumes (1) that if things are redistributed there is enough for everyone; (2) that disparities are not natural; and (3) that redistribution is a moral and economic imperative. Neo Liberalism is based, philosophically, on a radical individualism which denies that, and this has been the dominant political and economic philosophy of the past forty years.

To Myers' three principles I want to add two further factors. The first is the assumption in Leviticus 25.23 that the land belongs to God. 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but migrant labourers (*gerim*) and settlers (*toshavim*)'.

Ton Veerkamp calls this perhaps the most important verse in Scripture.¹¹ The denial of absolute possession of the land, on the ground that 'the land is mine', means that there are no absolute property rights, and that therefore no class structure is other than provisional. 'In every society', writes Veerkamp, 'there is a God, that is, that which finally undergirds everything, the ground order, and at the same time the limiting instance of the right to property'.¹² Land, for the biblical writers, is not a form of private property with its exclusive character and absolute right of use and abuse. Israel did not have this right, at least according to the authors of Leviticus. I want to propose a gloss on this verse. In Ancient Israel land was the basic means of production. I therefore read this verse as, 'The means of production shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the means of production are mine'. I am reading the prescriptions of Leviticus as applying not simply to ancient Israel, but to the world we inhabit, and not just to ancient Israelites, but to all of us.

⁹ Ched Myers *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington: Church of the Saviour 2001) p. 1

¹⁰ Ched Myers *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994) p.165

¹¹ T.Veerkamp *Autonomie & Egalität: ökonomie, Politik, Ideologie in der Schrift* (Berlin :Alektor 1993) p. 98

¹² Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 101

What would be the political implications of such a faith commitment? Those of you with long memories will recall that there was once an institution called the Labour party, committed to common ownership of the means of production. Common ownership of the means of production, I suggest, is a realistic way of honouring Lev 25.23.

The fact that, according to this text, we are but migrant labourers and settlers qualifies the immense emphasis on the gift of land in Deuteronomy but I suggest that it still leaves us with a commitment to a specific place. This is the implication, I take it, of the verses which follow about the need to see that property is not permanently alienated, which is the whole point of the jubilee legislation. This is of great importance in the era of globalisation. 'A culture capable of preserving land and people', argues Wendell Berry, 'can be made only within a relatively stable and enduring relationship between a local people and its place'.¹³

One cannot live in the world; that is, one cannot become, in the easy, generalizing sense with which the phrase is commonly used, a 'world citizen'. There can be no such thing as a global village. No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one's partiality.'¹⁴

Profound attachment to place, we could say, is some version of the 'bondage which is freedom'. In Aristotelian terms, acceptance of limits is essential to our humanness and to proper care of the planet. A key way of talking about limits is to talk about place. To think of place in terms of limits is perhaps what is meant by M.V.McGinnis' description of human beings as 'boundary creatures', which is to say creatures needing boundaries, disintegrating without them. Such boundaries are represented by all cultural fundamentals – language, cuisine, and so on. These boundaries are not respected by the hybridized world of the global economy which is based on the development and homogenization of space (as opposed to place).¹⁵

A politics of place

My third step is to reflect on a politics of place. Taking place seriously politically involves learning from bioregionalism. The key insight of this is that present political boundaries map very crudely, if at all, on to boundaries represented by watersheds, soil, and the species differentiation which goes with them. 'A bioregion', says R.L.Thayer, 'is literally and etymologically a life place – a unique region definable by natural (rather than by political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological

¹³ W.Berry *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon 1992) p. 171

¹⁴ W.Berry 'The Body and the Earth' in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco Sierra Club 1996) p.123

¹⁵ M.V. McGinnis 'A rehearsal to bioregionalism' in M.V.McGinnis(ed) *Bioregionalism* (London: Routledge 1999) p.5

character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities'.¹⁶ Because a community is by definition placed, argues Wendell Berry, 'its success cannot be divided from the success of its place, its natural setting and surroundings: its soils, forests, grasslands, plants and animals, water, light, and air. The two economies, the natural and the human, support each other; each is the other's hope of a durable and a liveable life'.¹⁷ This is precisely what is denied by globalization. More than a decade ago *The Economist* reported that in the automotive, airline, aerospace, electronic components, electrical and electronics and steel industries the top five firms control more than half of the global market. Already by 1993 the largest three hundred global corporations owned around one quarter of the world's productive assets. This means that at least a quarter of the assets on which the world's people and communities depend for their living are held under the most extreme form of absentee ownership delinked from concern or responsibility for their well being.¹⁸ One of the things that bioregional economics is concerned with, then, is the democratization of the economic process, something that I have argued is essential to democracy full stop. But a working democracy, I want to argue, has to begin at the local level.

Noting that we cannot predict the impacts of the global emergency, with regard to climate change, water depletion, food security and so forth, Richard Heinberg argues that the only way forward is to build resilience throughout the system. 'Resilience implies dispersed control points and dispersed inventories, and hence regional self-sufficiency – the opposite of economic efficiency, the central rationale for globalization – and so it needs to be organized primarily at local level.'¹⁹

At this point some of you will be getting nervous, and thinking that here we have the agenda of the Big Society. Part of what is meant by this is that local people should have more influence over where they live; that local agendas should be set by local people, and should be realised through local elections and referenda, and that consultation and engagement is crucial. Is that what I am proposing? Not quite, because the prior agenda of the big society is the familiar argument that the state is enervating, that for people to be restored to their vigour welfare support must be withdrawn, and that the private sector led by the market is best placed to provide the fundamental resources we need, such as health and education.

Two problems with this are that the market has no incentive to intervene if, for example, carbon emissions need to be cut, or if alternative technologies are costly to produce. And secondly, to devolve things to the market is profoundly anti democratic. It bypasses the whole issue of citizen responsibility, replacing it with shareholder responsibility, which is a quite different matter. In fact it is a return to the situation prior to universal adult suffrage, where only the propertied – and property here means shares – have the vote.

¹⁶ R. L. Thayer *Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California 2003) p.3

¹⁷ W. Berry 'Does Community have a Value?' In *Home Economics* (New York: North Point 1987) p. 192

¹⁸ Korten *Post Corporate World* p. 167

¹⁹ <http://www.richardheinberg.com> museletter 212 The Meaning of Copenhagen January 2010

But of course there is another danger. Surely appeals to place have grounded the most reactionary and exclusionary politics? Yes they have. When Exeter City Council carried out a survey of people's priorities recently many of the responses related to the removal of Travellers sites. How do we deal with chauvinism, ethnic cleansing and nimbysism? Could a bio regional polity be progressive?

In the Federalist papers Jefferson and Madison debate the nature of democracy. Jefferson wanted participative democracy. Madison insisted that huge numbers could only be governed by representation, and that the task of educating an electorate could only be undertaken in that way. Madison won and you can see the point. Views and opinions will tend to cluster around ideologies; not everyone can be an independent; and once that happens you have parties. We take them for granted, but we should remember that Simone Weil, in 1942, advocated the abolition of parties in post war France on the ground that they stifled real political debate. 'The intelligence is defeated', she wrote, 'as soon as the expression of one's thoughts is preceded, explicitly or implicitly, by the little word 'we'. And when the light of the intelligence grows dim, it is not very long before the love of good becomes lost'.²⁰ In our case we have two major parties, one of which originates in the seventeenth century, the other in the nineteenth, neither of which, I suspect, reflects the priorities of the majority of the population. I want to suggest an alternative. Jefferson said that parish councils were to democracy what elementary schools were to learning. For those of you with knowledge of parish councils that may raise a sardonic laugh, but I suggest the Transition movement may provide these building blocks for a truer and more open democracy.

Since not all of you will be familiar with Transition I will outline it. Some of you will have seen the headline in the Guardian earlier this year, which claimed that the Pentagon believes 'Peak Oil' will occur in five years time, 2015. Peak Oil does not mean that oil will simply run out: it does mean that the age of cheap and easily available oil is over: we are down to tar sands, deep sea beds and the Arctic. Since virtually our entire lifestyle, and especially our farming, depends on oil, and there is no substitute yet in sight, it is wise to ask what we are going to do when that happens. This is the agenda of the Transition Town movement, and of course Oxford is a transition city. What work are people going to do when commuting is no longer an option? Even more important, what are they going to eat? These are the questions of Transition towns. Beginning in Kinsale in Ireland, and then in Totnes in England, the movement has spread all over the world. In Britain there are more than 200 Transition Towns.

It has a number of points of major interest. First, it is aligned to no leading political party or ideology: it is interested in finding answers to a pressing practical problem. It addresses itself to the whole community, and to people of every party. Second, although it has no political agenda it is actually a deeply democratic exercise in that it wants to put power into the hands of ordinary people in their locality. It does this by getting people to reflect on transport, energy, and food and to seek strategies which will withstand the oil shock or, to use the Transition buzz word, 'be resilient'. It does this through consensus decision making, adopting procedures like open space. It trains people in conflict

²⁰ S.Weil, *The Need for Roots* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978 p. 26

resolution, so that deeply defended ideological positions can be negotiated. It is about citizens taking responsibility for their society and for their future. On my understanding this is what politics is. If Jefferson is right then perhaps a new, truer and more open democracy might be merging which will replace the old forms of party politics which have had their day.

Transition is not a Christian initiative but it resonates with Christianity on at least three levels:

1. It shares with Christianity an emphasis on the priority of community. The vision of the empowerment of every member of the community in 1 Corinthians 12, which is itself a version of Numbers 11.32, the idea that 'all God's people are prophets' is profoundly consonant with the Transition ethos. Transition believes that things will change, and can only change, through community.
2. Like Christianity it bets on the weak rather than the strong, on ordinary people rather than 'leaders', the powerful, politicians. At its conferences it has keynote listeners but not keynote speakers. It therefore disavows the cult of celebrity, of the charismatic leader.
3. The doctrines of incarnation and church are premised on a relation of local and global, universal and particular. In the same way, Transition acts on the local level, but with an understanding that local actions bear on the global. It is the parish principle. The church is here in this place, but also universal, in the whole earth (catholic).

It is obvious that any politics grounded in the region would need both a strong legal framework, a strong commitment to policing by consent, and a strong commitment to globally networked decision making in a body such as the UN if global problems like climate change, and therefore energy security, are to be addressed. Such networking will inevitably mean more bureaucracy, but that is the price which has to be paid for effective local democracy and the necessary co-ordinating structures at a higher level.

From the Transition model follows the idea of a place based politics which, rather than being exclusionary, chauvinist and parochial, could be a basis for a nurturing and cooperative society in which individual dignity was respected and the needs of eight or ten billion are met. Prophecies that the nation state is dead are probably premature but that there are more creative ways of organising human community has to be true and perhaps a proper attention to place is as promising a way to think about alternatives as any. Christians are led by their faith to cherish place, and the individuality which comes with that, whilst at the same time recognising that the whole earth is the Lord's, that therefore there should be common ownership of the means of production, and that the earth's resources should be shared equally. In an overcrowded, fragile and threatened world such cherishing and celebration seems to me to be a key ethical demand, a version of seeking the shalom of the place in which we find ourselves, as Jeremiah puts it (29.7), which will be crucial to the maintenance of fully human values in the coming century.

