

FORSYTH, HAYEK AND THE REMORALISATION OF SOCIETY: CHURCH, LIFE AND ECONOMICS

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The following is the text of the Dr. Shergold Memorial Lecture, given by Professor Hibbs to the Annual Conference of the Congregational Federation of Lay Preachers at King Street Congregational Church, Newcastle-under-Lyme, on June 27th 1992.

I am sensible of the honour the Lay Preachers Association does me in inviting me to deliver this lecture, and thus to stand in a tradition to which I belong through my own inheritance as a Congregationalist. We all of us stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and I would like to pay tribute here, as is properly due, to those

of my father's generation, who looked to him for a promising future before his untimely death - to Revd. Dr. H. Lovell Cox, Dr. Nathaniel Micklem, Dr C. J. Cadoux and Dr. C. H. Dodd - to whose work I also am indebted as I stand before you today.

These men were among the prophets of our age; an age in which the status of the prophet has become sadly lowered. But the two names that appear in the title of this lecture are those of men whose prophetic voice, I would assert, has more to say to us than that of any other, as we face the problems of an age in which the 'civil virtues' appear to be disintegrating everywhere. Of each of them we may echo

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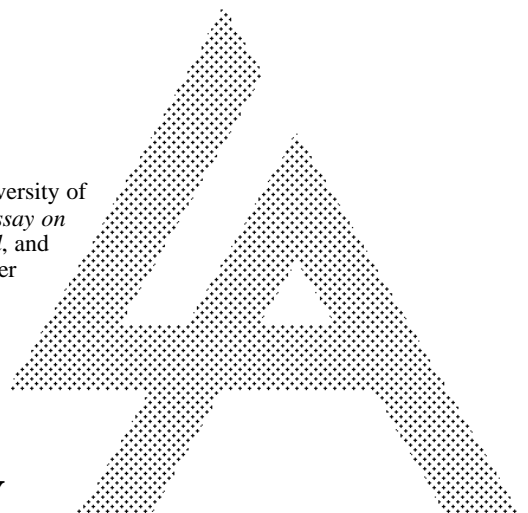
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



Matthew Arnold's words on the lack of a sage, 140 years ago, whose voice we should still heed today:

But where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?

Of Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848-1921) it has been said that he is the only theologian apart from Tyrrell whose theological work "can really be profitably read for its own sake seventy years later".¹ And of Friedrich August von Hayek (1899-1992) it was said by Sir Karl Popper, another powerful analyst of the sickness of our society, "I regard Hayek's work as a new opening of the most fundamental debate in the field of political philosophy."² Yet these two men, each outstanding in his field, have one thing in common that I want to emphasise today, which is the concern for the individual that also marks our evangelistic tradition in the churches. Forsyth's emphasis on the primacy of the Atonement for Christian life I want to set beside Hayek's concern with the rule of law, which enables men and women to pursue their own objectives, untrammelled by the dictatorship of the collective. Perhaps the two come together in the words of Augustine (approved by Forsyth):

Dilige et quod vis fac.
(Love and do what you will.)

Or perhaps we could go further, turning to Romans 8, 28 (A.V.):

All things work for good to them that love God.

which pleases me, because it was a favourite text of my father's.

But if one thing is certain, in our times, it is that the order of things - something that we may call 'civil society', discussed by the Warden of St Anthony's College³ - appears to be disintegrating. Honest dealing, security of property, and the sanctity of contract are the bulwarks of liberty; that is at the heart of Hayek's philosophy. All turns upon individuals following these abstract rules that have been proved to benefit us all. And beside that let us place Forsyth's words: "the cross is the centre and source of Christian ethics".⁴ Not the Sermon on the Mount; not "the moral teaching of Jesus"; but the cross and its meaning for the problems of today. My purpose in this Lecture is to seek to show that the moral underpinning of society, as defined by Hayek, can only be achieved by the teaching of Forsyth on the church's role as "the moral guide of society". That such a role is needful I find recognised in another paper, from which I take the title of the Lecture, a paper by Stephen Davies called *Towards the Remoralisation of Society*, reprinted in 1991 by the Libertarian Alliance.⁵ In it Davies stresses that "there needs to be a non-state-led campaign of moral reform, carried out by private and voluntary organisations and dependent upon personal action", and he concludes:

Lastly - what will probably take longest - there must be change in the climate of opinion and belief. This requires action from everybody but particularly from schools, churches, writers and journalists and academics. This will be the slowest to have effect but the impact will be the most profound and long-lasting.⁶

FREEING OURSELVES OF TWENTIETH CENTURY THOUGHT

It is the greatness of the two prophets whose words I commend to you that they stand above all the nostrums of twentieth century thought that are going to sound so irrelevant in the twenty first. Distributivism, paternalism, interventionism - Marxism too - all these are now seen to be 'wasms'. In their place we can see Hayek's concept of an "extended order"; perhaps one of the most significant of his insights. Human activity, he observes, spontaneously produces such order that we are tempted to think it has been designed, but this is a fallacy. Information is in fact so diffuse that it is not possible for it to be brought together so as to permit such design, and attempts at any 'grand design' are inherently doomed to failure.

This, I think, must be something with which we, as Congregationalists, must be in sympathy, and I find echoes of it in Forsyth's thinking about the Church. While emphasising that the day of sectarianism is over, he has this to say on re-union:

The divisions of the churches can only be dealt with by federation; they are incurable along the line of absorption into one imperial church, or by the erasure of frontiers in an abstract and mystic fraternity.⁷

Hayek goes on in his best-known work, *The Road to Serfdom*,⁸ to stress the coercion of the individual which is inherent in Socialism, and here I find a correspondence in Forsyth's support of what today we would call the market economy:

To hear some talk you would think that making money was a crime, and the whole end of business making money. It is not so. Trade with its profits is absolutely needful for the employment and comfort of mankind, and for eliciting the resources of both men and Nature. It is a contribution, or we may make it so, to the spirit of that same love which sustains, saves, and develops mankind.⁹

There is thus a great deal to think about from both of these prophetic writers that challenges many of the assumptions of our own time, and that does so in the defence of the individual human spirit. Hayek might not use the word 'soul'; indeed, he finds it difficult to assert or deny "the existence of what others call God", but in stressing his observation that "The only religions that have survived are those which support property and the family",¹⁰ he is coming very close to the spirit of Forsyth's work. The difference is summed up in these words from *The Justification of God*: "the cross is the centre and source of Christian ethics".¹¹

Yet there is still a distinction to be made between the thinking of the two men, which we must observe in fairness to them both. Forsyth, in the mainstream of social policy then and now, takes it for granted that the Church - and all Christians - ought to be concerned for the attainment of 'social justice'. Hayek denies meaning to the term. In this he does not deny - indeed, he stresses - that there are "rules of justice" that concern us in our dealings with each other as individuals, as we have already seen. (In Forsyth's work it is the power of God's grace that leads us to just dealings with each other, and - perhaps - this implies the emergence of rules like the sanctity of contract

that mean so much to Hayek). But I think that Forsyth, were he living today, would be one of the first to accept the force of Hayek's comment, that

Justice is a moral concept, only human beings and their deeds can be called moral or immoral, virtuous or wicked, just or unjust.¹²

What is commonly meant by social justice is a coercive redistribution of property (or money, as a proxy for it). This, in Hayek's argument, will worsen the chances of just relationships developing between individuals, and undermine the extended order of society. The conclusion must then be that 'society' is not and never can be 'a person', having the necessary information, and wisdom, to arrive at a greater element of justice among men and women. When we consider the things that have been done in our time with an appeal to 'society', and, even worse, to 'the nation' - I am thinking of Yugoslavia as an example - we must surely feel that Hayek should be listened to.

Forsyth, of course, was living at a time when it was widely held that social problems could be confronted by central decision-making, and it behoves us to respect the chronology of our theme. Hayek's thought belongs to a later generation, when we have begun to realise that "you can't make people righteous by Act of Parliament". But deep in Forsyth's teaching, and to be found everywhere in it, is the emphasis on the meaning of the cross for the individual soul. Out of that, he seems to be saying, comes the only hope for society:

It is the death of Christ that is the chief condition of modern progress. It is not civilisation that keeps civilisation safe and progressive. It is that power which was in Jesus Christ and culminated in his death and resurrection.¹³

Matthew Arnold called Goethe "physician of the Iron Age", and I am tempted to call Forsyth and Hayek "physicians of the nuclear age". But in linking their thought in this way, I have to add that there must be no implication that (were they to meet) Hayek would accept Forsyth's theology, or that Forsyth would accept Hayek's economics. It is the congruence of their conclusions that I am seeking to set out here.

FACING THE NEW CENTURY

As we near the end of the twentieth century we see on all sides the signs of 'civil society' breaking down. People who have become disillusioned with the promises of a planned economy and a welfare state see the failure of the media and the educators to offer any foundation for progress. The family itself is threatened, as the moral nihilism of the age eats away at the great social institutions. And nowhere do I find the dilemma better put than it is in Davies's *Towards the Remoralisation of Society*:

... moral relativism, the great scourge of our time: the assumption that there is no right or wrong, that one act or code is as good as another with everything dependent upon the situation or the whim of the actor.¹⁴

According to Legutko, Hayek saw Freudianism as "responsible for the rejection of all traditions of moral rules as 'repressive and inhibitory'."¹⁵ (I think we may rightly distinguish between Freud and Freudianism, as we often

must between Christ and Christianity). So it is of central importance to recognise that Hayek's concept of the extended order, which excludes the notion of 'social justice', depends upon the observation of traditional rules of conduct, such as honesty and fair dealing, and, most fundamentally, respect of the 'life, liberty and property' of others. It has been, Hayek explains, the observation that such rules enable people to prosper, that has enabled the growth of wealth in the developed world, and it has been the negation of such principles in the name of socialism that has caused the descent of the east and south into poverty and misery. But the rules must have an authority that can be appealed to.

It is a fallacy to suppose that society can itself provide such authority, since the rules, or *mores*, which it generates are human constructs themselves. Society, after all, is an epiphenomenon; it is no more than the changing reflection of what is from time to time found to be acceptable behaviour. And it is tragically open to being manipulated by fundamentalist creeds that deny the very liberty that allows progress. (The most devastating recent example has been the 'secular religion' of Marxism, which has prevented the emergence of such spontaneous order as might have mitigated some of the great natural disasters of our times). Rules derived 'from society' have no more moral force than do rules derive from abstract thought. They are not, if I may turn to Wordsworth, "Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart".¹⁶

Legutko,¹⁷ contemplating the problems facing Polish society as it moves from communism to liberalism, and following Hayek in the assumption that the benefits of the extended order have come from the evolution of ideas, questions whether libertarian ethics are sufficient for the existence of a liberal society. Faced with the breakdown of social ethics in our own society, we shall do well to consider this question. For surely Davies is right to stress the anti-social values that we observe in the media, in the school curriculum and on the streets.

Legutko suggests three possible sources for "austere moral rules", which have been postulated by distinguished thinkers in the past. One, which he calls "republican civility", is to be seen in the Founding Fathers of the United States of America. Another, "communitarian traditions", derives from Edmund Burke, and is probably the most typical of English thinking before moral rules began to go out of fashion. The third, supported by some of the great thinkers of the century now ending, is religion.

Hayek, an agnostic himself, is inclined to support the importance of religion. He says, disarmingly:

These remarks may be unpalatable to some intellectuals because they suggest that, in their own long-standing conflict with religion, they were partly mistaken - and very much lacking in appreciation.¹⁸

He then goes on to suggest:

Perhaps what many people mean in speaking of God is just a personification of that tradition of morals or values that keeps their community alive ... perhaps most people can conceive of abstract tradition only as a personal Will. If so, will they not be inclined to find this will in 'society' in an age in which more overt supernaturalisms are ruled out as superstitions?

And he concludes, chillingly:

On that question may rest the survival of our civilisation.

BACK TO FORSYTH

That last passage I confess to find infinitely depressing, yet it enormously increases my respect for Hayek that he could maintain hope for the future without the certainty of a holy and forgiving God, and of “the eternal cruciality of the Cross for human destiny” (Forsyth in *The Justification of God*).

In my conclusion, then, I would stress the tremendous moral force of Hayek’s argument that order in society must emerge spontaneously if it is to benefit people, and that attempts to impose human systems upon it can only worsen our plight. I would stress, too, what Hayek calls the atavism of ‘social justice’.¹⁹ Here he is respecting the traditions of loyalty and solidarity that belong to small groups, and are thus an inheritance from our tribal past - but observing that they are inappropriate to the extended order of modern society (and will be increasingly so, as Information Technology makes the world one great society, whether we like it or not). There is an integrity, a coherence in Hayek’s thought that makes his prophetic status plain. And always there is his emphasis on the value of the individual as superior to the synthetic values of the collective.

It is this that brings me back to Forsyth, and seems to me to link the message of these two great men. In Forsyth’s theology, as he applies it to the world in which he lived, as a man charged with ‘the cure of souls’, everything turns upon the cruciality of the Cross, first for the individual and then for society. *In that order*. The Christian ethic that follows from this turns upon three main points.²⁰

First:

Ultimately there are no ethics but theological.²¹

This I take to subsume the comment made earlier, that “you can’t make people righteous by Act of Parliament”, and thus it is very close to Hayek’s thinking.

Second:

The cross is the centre and source of Christian ethics.²²

The conclusion here is that the cross, and not the Sermon on the Mount, is the source of Christian morals, which I contend gives ethics an austerity and an authority that is *ultimately* outside of the relativity of society itself.

And third, taking us beyond the field of economics and into the heart of Christian religion:

Real forgiveness such as the penitent sinner receives at the cross, is in the same act quickening and regenerating.²³

For the forgiving grace of God is the mightiest and most permanent power in the modern world.²⁴

If we are to continue to build on the insights of Hayek, whose prophetic power is so great, then a great avenue opens if we will bring the light of Forsyth’s prophetic power to bear upon them.

I can understand now why my late father, one of Forsyth’s students at Hackney College, used to take as his text when entering into a new pastorate 1 Corinthians 2, 2:

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

From those words of Paul there flows the power that the church has, but too little uses, to achieve the ‘remoralisation of society’. It is a far greater power than any ‘ism’, and we neglect it at eternal peril.

NOTES

1. Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920 to 1985*, Collins, London, 1986.
2. Quoted on the cover of Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1988.
3. See Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1988.
4. P. T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next*, Independent Press, London, 1953.
5. Stephen Davies, *Towards the Remoralisation of Society*, Sociological Notes No. 12, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1991.
6. *Ibid*, p. 6.
7. Forsyth, *The Christian Ethic of War*, Longmans Green, London, 1916, quoted in Harry Escott, *P T Forsyth and the Cure of Souls*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1970.
8. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1944.
9. “A Holy Church the Moral Guide of Society”, an Address delivered in the City Temple, 9 May 1905, part of *The Church, the Gospel and Society*, Independent Press, London, 1962.
10. *The Fatal Conceit*, Ch. 9, p. 137.
11. *The Justification of God*, Independent Press, London, 1957, quoted in A. M. Hunter, *P T Forsyth, Per Crucem ad Lucem*, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1974.
12. Eamonn Butler, *Hayek - His Contribution to the Political and Economic Thought of Our Time*, Temple Smith, London, 1983, ch. 4, p. 87.
13. Quoted without attribution in Escott, *op. cit.*
14. *Towards the Remoralisation of Society*, p. 2.
15. Ryszard Legutko, “The Free Market in a Republic”, *Critical Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1991, p. 50.
16. *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*.
17. Legutko, *op. cit.*
18. *The Fatal Conceit*, pp. 135 ff, “Religion and the guardians of tradition”.
19. “The Atavism of Social Justice”, 9th R. C. Mills Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Sydney, 6 October 1976, reprinted in *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, pp. 57-68.
20. See Hunter, *op. cit.*
21. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, Independent Press, London, 1952, quoted in Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
22. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1907. Quoted in Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
23. *The Church, the Gospel and Society*, quoted in Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
24. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 94.