

THE END OF EQUALITY ?

A Strange Silence in Public Debate

The John Baillie Memorial Lecture 2001

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with responses from Christopher Rowland, Kathy Galloway
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Introduction

Anyone who thinks that Britain is an inclusive, egalitarian society should read the comments by people whom Kathy Galloway brought together through Church Action on Poverty to talk about being poor in Britain. One might expect their experience to be summed up in various words, but the two that surface first are humiliation and anger – the one characterising the quality of human relationships they have with their better-off neighbours, the other their judgment of the social and political systems that keep them poor.

The two strands of personal response and political action run through Duncan Forrester's Baillie Lecture, *The End of Equality? A strange silence in public debate*. Based on his book *On Human Worth*, the lecture is about far more than devising measures to narrow the gap in wealth, educational opportunities, health and job prospects that disfigure community in Britain and round the world, although these are important. It is about teasing out the nature, the origins and the consequences of the principle of equality – not equalisation, not uniformity, but the faith that each person, rich in their own dignity and distinctiveness, is of the same worth in God's eyes. Living that faith leads to encounters with justice and love that allow for no easy answers.

The lecture is haunted by a particularly demanding illustration of unequal circumstances – the contrast between a Scottish university professor and a beggar in Madras. No amount of personal good will can create the loving neighbourliness that would allow a right relationship to develop between the two; the intrusion of history, international economics, cultural expectations has to be addressed by political means. Yet, without a belief in the imperative of the equal worth of all, this process lacks urgency and direction, as can be seen in the withering of the ideal in current political discourse.

Forrester argues that the roots of this belief are unequivocally Christian. This is supported by Christopher Rowland who recognises that the “liberative/egalitarian trajectory” in the Bible is not the only strand but is the one privileged by the life and teaching of Jesus. It is therefore not surprising that the Christian tradition throws up many examples, such as l'Arche, of communities that try to live out what it means to accord equal worth to people of different gifts in the search for a just and decent society.

On the day after Duncan Forrester delivered his Baillie lecture, several of us were privileged to explore further the themes of his presentation. Kathy Galloway introduced Jean Urquhart and Sheena Barnes who talked imaginatively about the experience of poverty in Scotland today. Professor Lorraine Waterhouse then spoke of the social policy options for addressing poverty and inequality and Professor Christopher Rowland reflected on equality in the Biblical and Christian tradition. The papers presented here arise from that day and prompt further reflection on a principle whose importance defies the whim of political fashion.

Alison Elliot

The End of Equality ?

A Strange Silence in Public Debate



It is a special honour and pleasure for me to give the John Baillie Memorial Lecture for 2001. My friends know that the B in my name is not like the S in the name of Harry S. Truman, a lone initial simply added for effect, in order to impress. Nor is it there to make it easy for people to distinguish me from my brother David, or my son Donald. It is rather there, standing for Baillie, because I value very highly my family link with the Baillie brothers, Donald and John, and hope that in some small way my academic efforts have been moving in the same direction as theirs. As a boy in St Andrews, Donald Baillie was a dearly loved uncle-figure, and one whose light hearted seriousness about embodying his faith in his lifestyle deeply affected me. He was gentle and patient, especially in dealings with children, and confused students, or old folk in his elder's district, frightened to die. But chairing a public meeting on the iniquities of the Central African Federation, or the need for peace, he was a tiger! John Baillie I knew less well, at least until his final illness, when I as a New College student visited him from time to time. John was a prince of the church, and by that I mean not only the Church of Scotland but the world Church. And he gave the Church in Scotland a quality of leadership and a sense of direction that has hardly been equalled since.

John Baillie's Commission on God's Will in the Present Crisis, starting its deliberations when Britain stared defeat in the face, and ending when all the talk was of post-war reconstruction, gave a central place to equality. The Commission proclaimed that equality was among the ideals of the war whose nourishing source was to be found in the Christian faith.¹ Ideals such as this deteriorate, they suggested, when dissociated from their roots in Christian belief and worship. They are easily watered down, and become something 'not quite Christian'.² Christian belief in equality has specific roots which give the understanding of equality a particular shape. The Christian believes that we are all equal 'because we are made in God's image, because we are all sinners, and because for us all Christ died.'³ Secularist attitudes are 'likely to be grounded on self-esteem, the Christian attitude is always grounded on penitence', they said.⁴ Although the Commission

¹ *God's Will for Church and Nation: Reprinted from the Reports of the Commission for the Interpretation of God's Will in the Present Crisis as presented to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland during the War Years* (London: SCM Press, 1946), p. 24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

argues that 'the secularisation of our ideals is...bound to lead to a certain falsification and perversion of them', it also recognises that the official representatives of the churches have often neglected to teach fundamental Christian values, which have been kept alive by secular social and political movements: 'Not only have such men and movements frequently manifested a concern for the poor and the oppressed such as might put many Christians to shame, but they have also opened up to us many avenues of fruitful social effort to which the Church must now give its blessing as being legitimate extensions and applications of the principles that have inspired its own teaching',⁵

'The present exaggerated inequalities in the sharing of the products of industry', the Commission argued, lead to inequalities of power, giving some people arbitrary control over others, and making many dependent rather than free. This leads to class antagonisms, jealousy, pride and hatred.⁶ Thus 'extreme inequalities in the possession of wealth are dangerous to the common interest, and wise measures should be sought by which they may be controlled'. Indeed, 'economic power must be made responsible to the community as a whole.'⁷ And equality of educational opportunity, the so-called 'democratic intellect', is firmly endorsed.⁸

Particularly in early times, it is suggested, the Church offered a distinctive model of an egalitarian community:

Here was a new citizenship which broke down every existing 'middle wall of partition', which took no account of political or imperial frontiers, or of differences of race or colour or class; and towards which Greek and Jew and barbarian, slave and freeman, rich and poor, all stood in exactly the same relation... Here was a new community, with an ethos all its own; a community which cut across all existing communities; a 'third race' which dwelt only partly upon earth, for which national frontiers and racial barriers and class distinctions were all alike irrelevant, and whose Head, to whom it gave total allegiance, was divine.⁹

These were, of course, the days when south of the border, William Temple, and supremely R.H.Tawney were presenting a Christian case for equality with power and incisive relevance. They, with John Baillie and many others, being dead still speak with relevance and power to this generation and its problems.

* * *

I have chosen as the theme for this lecture The End of Equality? The term 'end' is, of course, ambiguous. It can mean Finis – something that is completed or forgotten, or set aside as no longer relevant. But End as Telos speaks of the purpose of equality, the goal to which it is directed. There are many today who believe that equality as a social norm is

⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 77-78.

indeed finished; it has shown itself to be no longer challengingly relevant; it lingers on in a shadowy existence, haunting the ruins of old churches, and the memories of senior citizens who can remember the heady days of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. But it has no role to play, they argue, in the social discourse of today. Others again see equality as the necessary way to the Telos of a just and decent society. I intend to argue that equality has not in fact passed its sell-by date, and that in the form that it has taken when shaped by Christian convictions it is of continuing relevance, at a variety of levels. And I must start with a personal experience which has haunted and challenged me for many years.

I

Munuswamy

A beggar, a burnt-out leper, with a clawed hand and hardly any toes, regularly begged on the footbridge over the railway outside the college where I taught in South India in the 1960s. His name, if I remember aright, was Munuswamy. I tried to speak to him with my halting early efforts in Tamil. I gave him small sums of money. I hoped that one day I would have the language and the courage to become a friend of Munuswamy. And then I began to encounter the reality of the 'great gulf' between Lazarus and the rich man that ultimately became the unbridgeable chasm between the rich man and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom in the story that Jesus told. Munuswamy with his broken life, his physical frailty, his illiteracy, his poor self-image lived in a different world from mine. I moved in a world of security, opportunity, excitement, health, independence, respect. Munuswamy lived in the tiny, circumscribed world of the railway bridge and his little mud hut, full of uncertainties about survival, dependent on the alms of others, his life a constant humiliation.

I feel I must do something for Munuswamy. But nothing I can do will put the relationship right. Whatever I do, I feel rotten. Any response I may make is simply a personal act which at best may ease Munuswamy's lot for a moment. And the very act of giving underscores the inequality between us. Charity, alms, doles-out do not establish neighbourliness or equality. Indeed they often make things worse, especially if they are impulsive, patronising, ill-considered. And even if I were to help Munuswamy in a serious way, how many hundreds of thousands of beggars are there in Madras; do they not deserve help as well?

The relationship (if one may call it that) between Munuswamy and me is so structured as to make virtually impossible an authentic, caring friendship between us. I am tempted to give Munuswamy a paltry sum to go away and terminate the embarrassing relationship. There is no way within our encounter of meeting Munuswamy's deeper needs, which are, as with everyone, for care, respect, affection and a recognition of worth as well as for material resources – always remembering that material resources may, or may not, be signs and expressions of care, worth and affection. Neither 'buying off' Munuswamy with a few coins, nor refusing to give alms, eases my conscience. It is the system that creates and tolerates such poverty, and the parody of authentic caring relationships involved in beggary, which are wrong. They offend against the conviction that Munuswamy and I are neighbours, given to one another to love.

In a way I envy the Good Samaritan. I am constrained not to pass by on the other side, like the priest and the Levite. But the Good Samaritan knew what to do. It demanded courage, and generosity and gentleness on his part. But it was a relatively clear and simple act he was called to undertake. I don't know what to do. I am surrounded with ambiguities and uncertainties. And not all of them are evasions.

I know that Munuswamy and I ought to be neighbours, but seemingly we cannot be. And this hard fact reminds us that the establishment of equality cannot be simply a matter of individual morality and personal responses. The whole community is involved. Munuswamy sits begging on the railway bridge partly, or mainly, because of the way the economy and society have treated him. And these are not impersonal irresistible forces. They can be controlled and managed, and people who lose out in the market may be compensated if society sees fit to do so. Munuswamy is begging on the bridge, dependent on the charity of others, because of welfare legislation and practice – or the absence of it. And I know, because I am educated, that not only is it incredibly hard for Munuswamy and me to be neighbours, but that I actually *benefit* in subtle anonymous ways from Munuswamy's distress.

Our encounter is conditioned by the fact that Munuswamy is poor in a poor, euphemistically called *developing*, country, while I come from a powerful and prosperous Western economy. My prosperity and Munuswamy's poverty reflect this global inequality. Our relationship – or lack of it – highlights in human terms the realities of the world economic system, and illustrates why these inequalities are a matter of moral concern. It also suggests the complexity of responding to inequality, harmful and unacceptable as it may be. And we must always remember that there are 'Munuswamys' in the wealthy societies where still, as in India, the reality of inequality is that great wealth exists alongside poverty.

Personal initiatives on their own are hopelessly inadequate to the scale and complexity of the problem. It would be better if some of my resources should be rechannelled anonymously through the taxation system to Munuswamy and his kind. That would be both less patronising and more likely to have positive results than impulsive individual giving. It would be good if Munuswamy were to be taken care of – and care is one of the things he needs – by skilled, wise and sensitive people on my behalf and as representatives of the broader community. But these things would be just a beginning, just palliative measures in dealing with a social cancer. So we must talk about social policy, social attitudes, the economy, and the kind of community that we want as well as about individual behaviour. We must consider global economic processes such as international debt, and work out, as the Jubilee 2000 Movement has done so effectively, how steps may be taken towards a more just and equal situation.

But above all, we must discuss ways of expressing how, despite our differences (some of which are good and valuable) Munuswamy and I are of equal worth, each entitled to self-respect and dignity. Worth needs to be recognised and given substance in action, in policy, in the way our society operates and structures itself. And in today's world these issues inevitably impinge on world economic relations.

Inequality is thus not only an individual matter; it is a social and indeed global concern. It does not simply impede proper neighbourly relations between people like

Munuswamy and me; it destroys community by excluding and degrading people; as we now know, inequality makes people ill and kills people. In the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man by his callousness and blindness excluded Lazarus from fellowship – and then, after death he was himself in his turn excluded from the fellowship with Abraham that Lazarus now enjoyed, and made subject to judgement.

Munuswamy now begs on the streets of Edinburgh, and London, and New York as well as Tambaram. The challenge and the opportunity he represents is on our doorstep, here in Britain.

II

The Eclipse of Equality

For nearly thirty years after the end of the Second World War the conventional wisdom in Britain and most other western liberal societies included a belief that equality was a significant social value, and a good thing. Some form of welfare state was commonly seen as both a way of providing for the needs of people in a fashion that was dignified and compassionate, and a major instrument for gradually transforming the nation into a more equal and caring society. Not everyone shared the consensus, of course, but dissident voices were few and not widely heeded. Disagreements were more about pace and priorities than about the *direction* of social change. Many people regarded the task as no more than ‘fine-tuning heaven’.

The ending in the late 1970s of the consensus about equality represented a major swing of the ideological pendulum. This has stimulated a necessary and important ongoing debate about fundamental social values and objectives, and the practical strengths and weaknesses of institutional expressions of these values. It has resulted in considerable conceptual clarification. During the decades of consensus the case *against* equality was rarely heard; discussion was mainly about matters of implementation rather than fundamental choices of social goal. Now the case against equality came once more to the forefront of discussion, and among advocates of equality there was a fairly widespread disillusion with the strategies that had been adopted to move towards equality. Some people argued that we should continue to pursue equality after a thorough review of the achievements, failures, and problems of the road so far, and a checking of our moral compass bearings. Others called for a radical change of direction, having concluded that the path traversed for some thirty years was a cul-de-sac or worse; now we must go by a new road to a different destination. As recently as 1995 the Marxist philosopher, Gerry Cohen, could write: ‘In the past, there seemed to be no need to *argue* for the desirability of an egalitarian socialist society. Now I do little else.’¹⁰

It was for me the most revealing and disturbing moment in a very dull and cautious election campaign. Jeremy Paxman was quizzing Tony Blair on *Newsnight*. He asked if the Prime Minister was concerned about the rapidly deepening gulf between rich and poor in British society. Blair’s response was to dodge the question. But Paxman, characteristically, was not to be fobbed off so easily. He repeated the question and asked

¹⁰ Cohen, G. A., *Self-ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 7.

for a straight answer I think four, or even five times. The furthest Tony Blair would go was to say he was concerned about poverty, and planned to give the poor more of the *opportunities* that others had in British society. The rich were not a problem, it appeared, and accordingly nothing was to be done about the widening gap. Words like 'equality' and 'redistribution' never came from the Prime Minister's mouth during the campaign. He wants, it seems, to remove them from the public agenda. For him, and many like-minded people, equality today is no longer a guide or a goal, but an embarrassment or an irrelevance. The Thatcherites did their best to dispose of equality some years ago.¹¹ But even New Labour can't make the longing for equality go away. Because equality is so deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition, and has down the years been such a constant challenge and irritant in western public discourse that it will not be wished away by those who believe, despite the evidence, that the market can provide prosperity and a modicum of justice in a decent society.

Many people assume that equality is past its sell-by date.¹² It is marked 'Best before 1960'. It is no longer a guide, but an embarrassing and irrelevant ghost. Like feudalism, it once held sway as a social ideal. Now it is merely a curiosity in the museum of ideology. Today equality is at an end. Amitai Etzioni, the Guru of New Labour, acknowledges that 'those who charge that there is no place for equality on the Third Way are right'. The best that can be hoped for is not redistribution but seeking 'to flatten the pyramid mainly by lifting the lower levels, again and again, and to a significant degree.'¹³

The need for a debate about equality presents a major challenge to Christian theology. Christianity, after all, has made a significant contribution to the generation, maintenance and critique of fundamental social values such as equality, and also to the making and implementation of institutions and policies which seek to express these values, for two millennia. A Christianity which ceased today to address itself to such matters or make a contribution to the public debate would be lacking in integrity and disregardful of its responsibilities. And a Christian theology which no longer believes it has a bearing on the social, political and ethical issues of the day has become no more than 'idle Sunday chatter'.

The collapse of the old dominant ideologies of the Left is in most ways not a bad thing. But it is also a problem. These ideologies at least managed to sustain the kind of utopian hopes which challenged generations to altruism and generosity, to rising above their individual and group self-interest to seek a larger good. Today we face, in the words of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, 'the exhaustion of utopian energies'.¹⁴ Is it, perhaps, in such a situation a responsibility of the Christian churches to rekindle the hope of the authentic utopia, the Reign of God? Certainly I am not sanguine that the ideologues

¹¹ See, for example, Joseph, Keith and Sumption, Jonathan, *Equality* (London: 1979).

¹² Cf. Ronald Dworkin in *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 1: 'Equality is the endangered species of political ideals. Even a few decades ago any politician who claimed to be liberal, or even centrist, endorsed a truly egalitarian society as at least a utopian goal. But now even self-described left of center politicians reject the very ideal of equality.'

¹³ Etzioni, Amitai, 'The Third Way is a triumph', *New Statesman*, 25 June 2001, p. 27.

¹⁴ Habermas, J., 'The New Obscurity and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies', in *Observations on the Spiritual Situation of the Age*, ed. Habermas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

of the present government, with all their talk of the 'Third Way', and their reluctance to address directly issues of poverty and inequality and redistribution, are capable of generating imaginative and realistic political visions. Indeed much of their rhetoric seems directed primarily at not disturbing the electorate by speaking in terms of the sacrifices and the costs that might be involved in building a more just and caring society.¹⁵

III

Love your Neighbour as Yourself

True loving, asserts that strange Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, requires equality between the lovers. If there exists a great difference of wealth or power or social standing between the would-be lovers, it is hard for love not to be distorted or eroded by the inequality. In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard develops this theme in relation to the incarnation by producing a parable about a king who sought to love a poor and humble maiden. The king, in all his power and splendour, knows that 'love is exultant when it unites equals, but it is triumphant when it makes that which was unequal equal in love.'¹⁶ His courtiers tell him he is about to confer a vast favour on the girl for which she should be eternally grateful. The king, understandably, was deeply disturbed by this. Is his love a condescension to which the proper response is gratitude rather than reciprocating love? Would his beloved be happy at his side? Would she ever be allowed to forget that he was king and she owed everything to his patronage? Would she perhaps be happier if he left her alone to marry a man who was in fact and in reality equal to her? Would that not be the only way in which true love, the love that demands equality, could flourish? And what, if coming from backgrounds so unequal, the king and the humble maiden could not understand one another?

Consider, Kierkegaard continues, the possibility that the king should reveal himself in all his majesty to the maiden. Would not this overwhelm her, and make love between them impossible? Or perhaps, suggests Kierkegaard, the maiden can be raised up, taught to speak and dress properly, and 'pass' in good society, like Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*. But here again, the distance and the inequality, the condescension, for whatever reason, of the king make love impossible. The only way of enabling a loving union is for the king to descend and identify with the maiden, and share her lot, her suffering and her poverty. He must take the initiative and become equal to her if they are to be able to love one another. And this can be no play-acting, or deceit. It is not enough to have a beggar's cloak which the wind sweeps aside to reveal the royal garments underneath; equality must be the true condition of the king, alongside his beloved in all respects: 'For this is the unfathomable nature of love, that it desires equality with the beloved, not in jest merely, but in earnest and in truth.'¹⁷

Kierkegaard is, of course, speaking at this point primarily of the incarnation, of God in Christ taking the form of a servant that God's love for all might be expressed. But

¹⁵ See especially Giddens, Anthony, *The Third Way and its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), and *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, S., *Philosophical Fragments*, Trans. David Svenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

he is also teaching more general lessons about love and equality, lessons which he believes are of universal truth and significance. The first is this: God loves everyone equally, and thus establishes human equality, which we should recognize.¹⁸

The second is that the love of equals does not mean the erosion of *difference*. Far from it. Difference also is necessary for loving. For Kierkegaard, loving demands both equality and difference. God has made us equal neighbours, and commands us to recognise and treat people as such. We are to see each other human being as our neighbour, as one God loves, and one we also ought to love. We must be able to see and understand and affirm both the neighbourly equality and the precious differences.

The barriers to love between people must be torn down if we are to obey the divine command. We are commanded to love *this* neighbour, to whom we have been made equal, 'as ourselves'. The command could hardly be stricter. We are not instructed to love our neighbours as if they were members of our own family, to whom we have specific duties and for whom we have clear responsibilities. That in itself would be demanding enough. It would mean, for example, that we should be as concerned about the education of children in our worst housing estates as we are about the education of our own sons and daughters. But we are commanded to love *as ourselves*, as if their interests were our interests. This cuts at the very root of our selfishness, and makes the claim of the neighbour on us almost without limits.

But who is the neighbour who has such a claim on us?

The Bible steadily expands the notion of the neighbour, from the person who lives close by, and is probably very like we are, through the stranger, who is different, to the person we consider impure or inferior, to the person with severe learning difficulties or physical impairment. The alien, the asylum-seeker, so often understood as threatening, so often the victim of pogroms or public hostility, is a neighbour with a neighbour's rights and claims. And finally, the enemy is declared a neighbour, the neighbour we are commanded to love. All these are given to us as neighbours, and we are commanded to love them! God has made us all equal in neighbourly equality so that love may be possible. And God loves us all equally.

Kierkegaard thus roots human equality firmly in the divine command to love the neighbour as oneself, always inseparably linked to the command to love God. With the command to love the neighbour as oneself, God gives us an infinite number of diverse neighbours and declares that they are equal to us, in all their difference. The command implies and declares the equality of the neighbours. The command calls for loving action on our part, based on the recognition that God has established the equality which is the condition for loving.

Kierkegaard's equivocation as to whether this God given equality should have a reflex in earthly structures and arrangements deserves some examination. Let me return to the problems of establishing a loving relationship between Munuswamy and myself. I feel guilt and confusion because I know that I am commanded to love Munuswamy, and I believe that God has, in all the important senses that matter, made us equal. And yet we cannot love one another. Why? The factors that keep us apart and frustrate our loving are

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 5.

to a great extent structural factors to do with wealth, and the social order, and culture – all obstacles that can be modified, and sometimes removed, by imaginative legislation and visionary leadership. There are limits to the adequate fulfillment of the love command simply in terms of individual action. And there are loving things that I should do for Munuswamy and he for me which must be done in a general way, anonymously, judiciously rather than passionately and directly.

The boundary between love and justice is in practice often impossible to demarcate, and loving is often best expressed in the doing of justice. Kierkegaard's cautions about hopes of our establishing God's Reign of peace and love today, or expecting a nation to act always lovingly are well taken. These cautions apply as much to individuals fulfilling the love command as to structural and collective ways of doing justice. To obey the love command involves more than individual activity, and its force should be felt in the temporal as well as the spiritual sphere. Love and justice are correlative terms; the one interprets the other.

And love is expressed, among other ways, in the generous sharing of material things. In a marriage, rings are exchanged, and the couple promise to share their 'worldly goods' – as signs of their love for one another. Similarly a pension paid by the state to a disabled or an old person is at the same time a sign that that person is valued by the community, and a transfer of resources from the more prosperous to the less well off members of the community, a sign that although they do not know one another, they are responsible for one another, they are neighbours.

But Kierkegaard is also right to remind us that we may not reduce the love of neighbour to just and generous measures of public policy. A decent society needs generous and loving citizens as well. And although we cannot bring God's Reign through our efforts, neighbour love also involves challenging structures of inequality and injustice.

IV

Belief in God and Belief in Equality

Richard Tawney, the economic historian and Christian moralist, believed throughout his life that: belief in God is the prerequisite for belief in human equality. Without such belief, a commitment to equality is uncertain and fragile, cut off from its sustaining roots. Tawney is quite explicit about two things: we are here dealing with *beliefs* or *convictions* about the worth of human beings, and, secondly, there is a kind of sustaining umbilical cord which it is very hazardous to cut between Christian belief and convictions about equality. The belief that human beings are equal is not the end result of a line of reasoning, it is not the conclusion of empirical study, nor is it a self-evident truth, or an arbitrary assumption. It is a matter of faith, and it coheres with the rest of Christian faith. It reaches below appearances and finds its transcendental grounding in the reality of God. It cannot be simply an arbitrary hunch, and it is certainly not the uniform conclusion of public discussion, the 'considered conviction' of most or all reasonable and thoughtful people in a modern liberal democracy.

Equality is a matter of faith. It is not a free-floating assumption, but it relates integrally to the structure of Christian belief, and in particular to the Christian understanding of God. Tawney is not, I think, denying that many people who have no religious belief in fact operate on the assumption of human equality; or that many Christian believers do not really believe in human equality. What he is suggesting is that one cannot probe the concept of human equality very deeply without discovering that it rests on explicitly Christian grounds, and that its shape is Christian, and therefore those who are serious about equality should take God seriously. And he is also suggesting that Christian believers should be encouraged, provoked, and helped to see that their Christian commitment leads, or should lead, directly to a commitment to human equality.

Tawney does not simply leave us with a stirring slogan, a superb one-liner: 'In order to believe in human equality it is necessary to believe in God'. He expounds it in an interesting way, he unpacks the notion, and elsewhere in his writings he addresses the question of the public responsibilities of the Christian community and of the state in relation to equality. Meanwhile, Tawney develops his theological argument in the *Commonplace Book*:¹⁹ In the face of God's greatness all human distinctions seem trivial and unimportant. That does not mean that we should not be concerned about them, or try to change them. They may be hurtful and damaging, but they are not to be treated with reverence, as sacrosanct, not to be tampered with.

It is not that God has made human beings so puny and insignificant that their hierarchies and patterns of domination don't matter; God has in fact made human beings 'a little lower than the angels'. God has ascribed to human beings immense dignity and honour. For Tawney, human beings all together occupy a common position just below the angels. Human beings are equal because God ascribes equality of status and of worth to them, they have been *made* that way in creation. Equality is given. It is not a quality that many, or most, human beings have, like rationality, or conscience. Nor is it a status that humans may achieve, or have achieved or deserved. Human beings are endowed with equal and infinite worth by God who made them. I cannot put the basic conviction better than in G. K. Chesterton's vivid image: people are equal in the same way pennies are equal. Some are bright, others are dull; some are worn smooth, others are sharp and fresh. But all are equal in value for each penny bears the image of the sovereign, each person bears the image of the King of Kings. We *are* equal; equality is not something we have or possess. 'The essence of all morality', writes Tawney, is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance... But to believe this it is necessary to believe in God.²⁰

The 'necessary corollary' of a Christian account of human nature is 'a strong sense of equality', affirming that all people are of equal value. Class privileges and great inequalities of wealth, writes Tawney, are 'an odious outrage on the image of God'.²¹ 'The essence of all morality,' writes Tawney, 'is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance and therefore that no considerations of expediency can justify the

¹⁹ Winter, J.M. and Joslin, D.M., *R.H. Tawney's Commonplace Book*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 53-54.

²⁰ Winter, J.M. and Joslin, D.M., *R.H. Tawney's Commonplace Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 67-68. Italics mine.

²¹ Tawney, R.H., *The Attack and Other Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), pp. 182-184.

oppression of one by another.' And once again he stresses: 'But to believe this it is necessary to believe in God.'²²

V

The Meaning of Equality

Equality for Tawney is necessary for right relationships between people, for the establishment and maintenance of community. Each human being is entitled to respect. All human beings, by virtue of their common humanity have a right to provision for their needs, and society should seek to cultivate this common humanity by putting stress on institutions and procedures which 'meet our needs and are a source of common enlightenment and common enjoyment.'²³

Equality does not mean a dreary sameness, a uniformity of life-style or provision; it does not mean identity of treatment. Indeed, Tawney's vision of equality is one which encourages a lively flowering of individuality and freedom, and sees equality as the presupposition of this flowering. Differences of character, intelligence and need will be taken very seriously; such, for Tawney, is an implication of equality.

Equality, for Tawney, is the necessary condition for fellowship and true community. Inequality divides communities and creates all sorts of barriers of suspicion and rivalry. Extreme inequalities are destructive of fraternity by breaking the ties of friendship and common purpose, and by setting groups and individuals in conflict and competition with one another.

Equality of opportunity, the *carrière ouverte aux talents*, a meritocratic society, as advocated by the leading ideologues of New Labour, is no way of establishing the kind of equality Tawney seeks. Historically, equality of opportunity has played an important and positive role in breaking up structures of hereditary privilege. But now it does not in any substantial way alter the unequal structure of society, but simply makes the 'plums' and the 'glittering prizes' slightly more generally accessible. But this greater accessibility to resources and position is more apparent than real, for Tawney is perfectly sure that only in a more equal society in which equality of worth is generally recognised can some people's handicap at the starting post be adequately provided for. True equality of opportunity may be an important *component* of the notion of equality, but it is by no means the whole story. The ideal of human equality must not be reduced to equality of opportunity. For the most part, equality of opportunity operates as a kind of lightning conductor that deflects a little of the damage done by social inequality. It obscures some of the more glaring and obnoxious examples of the 'disease of inequality' at the expense of making the condition of the unsuccessful even worse. Equality of opportunity does not build the kind of caring relationships between people that Tawney seeks. While it provides self-fulfillment for a few, it has no fulfillment to offer to the majority. What is

²² Winter, J.M. and Joslin, D.M., *R.H.Tawney's Commonplace Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 67.

²³ Tawney, R.H., *Equality* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 56.

needed instead of, or in addition to, equality of opportunity are 'collective movements to narrow the space between valley and peak'.²⁴

For Tawney, equality is not antithetical to liberty, but rather essential to the maintenance and diffusion of liberty. Frequently in the past, he believes, liberty has been regarded in too narrow a fashion. People have forgotten the social constraints and controls that ensure that one person's freedom is not used to harm others or to constrain their freedom. 'Freedom', he said 'for the pike is death for the minnows'.²⁵ Liberty must be extended rather than being regarded as the possession of one class or group. Tawney had no time for an equality imposed in such a way as to diminish or destroy freedom; indeed that would not for him be equality at all. The liberty he speaks of is 'equality in action' – all are equally protected against the abuse of power, whether that power be political, social or economic. Liberty and equality complement one another and must be held in balance as the twin piers on which a better community would be reared. Both equality and freedom suggest that power should be widely dispersed. Power, more equally distributed, should be used for the common good rather than selfish purposes pursued at the expense of the neighbour.

VI

The Strategy of Equality

Tawney was not a utopian who believed that the immediate realisation of equality at any cost was either desirable or possible. His plea is that society should take equality as one of its major objectives and make determined moves towards greater equality even if absolute equality was out of the question. The present degree of social inequality he regarded as quite unacceptable, because it was socially divisive and individually dehumanizing. The task, according to Tawney, is to diminish inequality with all deliberate speed in order to permit human individuality, freedom and fellowship to flower. Social goals are important as giving a sense of direction, even if they are never fully attained:

Tawney was aware, as many of his later disciples were not, that any serious moves towards equality would encounter determined resistance from vested interests which, if they could not stop egalitarian measures, would attempt to subvert them. He believed in redistribution of economic and political resources and argued that the economy must be made more accountable to the public. The welfare state for him was an egalitarian institution. And the educational system, particularly the private schools and the universities, must be tackled as they were – and are – bastions of inequality:

Tawney's strategy involved controlling the 'commanding heights' of the economy in the public interest, extending the system of social security and using it explicitly as a form of social engineering, reforming the educational system to ensure that it did not continue to perpetuate privilege and inequality, and ensuring through taxation that differences of wealth and income were progressively reduced.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

But the strategy of equality was not to be carried through by state action alone. There was a place for voluntary organisations, for local government and for community groups. The individual citizen (neighbour might be a better term), too, was an important agent of the strategy; attitudes had to be reformed if an active citizenry were to share in carrying through the strategy of equality. Indeed he thought that an 'intellectual conversion' was necessary if we were to have a more equal and Christian social order.²⁶ In seeking to 'bring every thought into captivity to Christ'²⁷, Christians should attempt to rise above their own social position and interests and attend to the call of the Lord and the needs of the neighbour. And the strategy of equality should influence the life of the Church as well as public policy.

VII

Exemplars of Equality

We have, in a sense, come full circle. The strategy of equality addresses the question with which we started, of how Munuswamy and I might relate to one another as loving neighbours. In addition to the strategy of equality's call for intellectual conversion, changes in personal life-style and suggestion of policies for moving towards greater equality, it offers existing models of egalitarian inclusive community which show what is possible, and are in a way anticipations of God's future. I conclude with brief reference to two of these.

In recent years I have been greatly impressed with two residential communities for people with severe learning difficulties – the people in the past stigmatised as 'idiots', 'morons', or 'cretins' – both L'Arche Communities based on the insights of Jean Vanier and Rudolph Steiner residential homes. In such communities great efforts are made to emphasise that carers and those cared for are both primarily members of the community. They are of equal worth and importance, and each person, no matter how seriously handicapped, has a contribution that can be made to the life of the community. The worth and value of each is affirmed; people learn to care and to be cared for; the community as a whole discountenances 'unacceptable behaviour', and enforces the norms necessary for living in community.

Or consider a Christian congregation gathered around the table to celebrate the Supper of the Lord. Typically, they are a mixed bunch. There is a poor elderly pensioner standing next to a young, prosperous and upwardly mobile banker. Here there is a middle-aged woman with Downs' Syndrome, and her sister who cares for her so willingly, standing next to a university professor. A twelve year old schoolgirl receives the bread and the wine from a long retired carpenter. A gay young man suffering from AIDS stands next to a mother of four children, a Chinese student who can hardly speak English and a visiting Indian Dalit join the circle. Each serves the neighbour, and is served in turn. There is enough for everyone's need, but not for greed. Yet there is an empty space, which makes the circle incomplete and broken. It is the place of honour, reserved for Munuswamy.

²⁶ Tawney, R.H., *The Acquisitive Society* (London: Bell, 1921), p. 223.

²⁷ II Cor. 10.5.

In such communities all, in their diversity and difference, find one another as equals and as neighbours, their infinite worth is affirmed and expressed. Here is a little *foretaste*, earnest of the promised equality, inclusiveness and community of the Reign of God. Such anticipations in small scale of egalitarian fellowship are important as working models of what God's future holds in store, and the best of ways for rekindling the utopian energies that should undergird policy. And they also give us clues as to how we might begin to heal our broken relationship with the Munuswamys of this world.

The roots of equality

‘they have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them’



The Bible appears to have little or nothing to say about equality, at least explicitly. Nevertheless, there is a persistent strand, particularly in the gospels, in which obedience to God involves pressure towards equalisation. If we start, as Duncan Forrester does in his lecture, with Munuswamy and the gulf that is fixed between him and ourselves two themes of importance emerge from the Jesus tradition. Firstly, that Jesus identifies with the poor and vulnerable: ‘inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me’. Secondly, it is they who understand something of the wisdom of God which is hidden from the sophisticated: ‘you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants’.

Approaches to Scripture, however, in the context of a discussion of Christian ethics need to start with the evidence of the gospels and Jesus which provide the necessary hermeneutical framework for considering other parts of the biblical tradition. The gospels’ witness to Jesus which privileges what Duncan Forrester calls ‘the liberative/egalitarian trajectory’ in the Bible over against others. Solidarity with the insignificant is the character of discipleship (Matt. 18.1-5). There is a message of hope for a great reversal when the first shall be last and the last first. This is not just a pipe dream but begins (to quote Duncan’s words) ‘in the midst of time’. There is at the heart of emerging Christianity an emerging identity in which goods and privileges which had hitherto been the preserve of a tiny elite were opened up to people who shared one baptism in Christ. Wealth, power, holiness and knowledge ceased merely to be the prerogative of an elite but were open to all within the common life of the Christian communities. The ethos of early Christianity involves the ongoing evocation of the pattern of a Christ who humbled himself, in obedience to the ‘one who sent him’ and in identification with the neediest and most vulnerable (Matt. 8.17). Those with earthly power and status and wealth renounce that status and learn a very different life style. There is no systematic exposition of equality in this, but an ethos of difference and a rejection of the culture of the ‘principalities and powers’, all of which is typical of the various forms of pre-Constantinian Christianity.

When we turn to the Hebrew Scriptures, although the issue of equality never emerges in connection with them, there is an insistence on a break in those patterns of relationships which sustain inequality. The laws do not countenance large disparities of wealth and status within the people of God. These are not utopian tracts but practical exemplifications of the way in which redistributive mechanisms can gain in effect a degree of equalisation.

The challenge to inequality is to be found often on the margins of the Christian tradition. Perhaps the most sustained attack on inequality is to be found in the Pelagian essay 'On Wealth' which offers a potent critique of wealth and property. Wealth is seen as the result of covetousness and theft and is the cause of violence. It causes difference of status between rich and poor and masks from the rich the recognition of their equal humanity with the poor. As in some other Christian writings of the period on wealth (and the practice of the monastic communities emerging at the same time), the author points out the structural injustices which result from disparities of wealth and status in society as with the change in personal life style.

Between 1648 and 1652 Gerrard Winstanley wrote tracts while he was actively involved in the 'Digger' colony he helped to create on St George's Hill in Surrey. The Diggers had a vision, not just to improve the lot of the hungry and landless through the cultivation of the commons, but to create a communist society of the kind they believed had existed before the Fall. Diggers held the Earth to have been originally a 'common treasury' for all to share. The Fall they regarded as the practice of buying and selling land, which allowed some to become rich and others to starve. From the consequences of this Fall humanity stood in need of redemption. True freedom could not be enjoyed by all until the land was held again in common, which was 'Christ rising in sons and daughters'.

The Gospel of Luke, as Duncan Forrester reminds us, underlines a theme with many echoes in the Bible that God might be outside the church, chapel, or college gates, at the margin of things, excluded with Lazarus, rather than in the splendid edifices of Christendom or in the assurance of the holy circle of the elect. Thither should Christians go out to meet Christ there. Theology has a responsibility for articulating the cry of Lazarus as the voice of God and explaining the nature of that meeting.

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Being poor in modern Britain



- **powerless,**
- **isolated,**
- **degraded,**
- **looked down on,**
- **scrutinised and judged.**

These are just a few of the words used by a group of people to describe what it feels like to be poor in modern Britain. They were meeting regularly under the auspices of Church Action on Poverty in Scotland to look at the issue of **poverty indicators** – the signs and symptoms, experiences and unmet needs which indicate the presence and reality of poverty in any given situation.

Of course, there are plenty of indicators of poverty that are easily measurable, such as inadequate income, substandard housing, poorer health and educational attainment. All of these figure largely in the experience of the group. But what was most striking was the extent to which intangible and largely unquantifiable indicators dominated their experience. In endless small, day-by-day occurrences and encounters, their experience of being poor is the experience of **humiliation**.

Some of that shows up in anger at the sheer injustice and inequality of their situations –

‘being angry about being on Income Support because of circumstances beyond my control’;

‘being angry about extortionate interest rates penalising poor people’ (the interest on an average mortgage loan is about 5%, the interest on a loan from a legal moneylender like Provident Financial, who are often the only source of credit for people living in poverty, is routinely around 160% APR, and can be more);

‘being angry about having a shorter life expectancy because I’m poor’ (life expectancy is about five years less for a man living in Drumchapel than for a man living in neighbouring affluent Bearsden);

but also in anger at a sense of powerlessness at this injustice:

- it’s a desired condition, not an accident; it’s in someone’s interest that people are poor
- there’s profit in other people’s poverty
- it’s totally fixable.

‘In poverty, people are not needed’:

Their experience of living in a market economy is that people have value according to the market: as those with capital (whether financial, intellectual or property), as those whose labour is sought-after, or at least, needed; as consumers. But they have no capital, their

labour is either redundant or low-wage, and they have no consumer clout. Regardless of other qualities they may have in abundance (compassion, kindness, humour, resilience, courage), in economic terms, they are non-persons.

And since the economic are the primary terms by which value is attributed in our society, society is given authorization to treat them as non-persons. Not only does this show up in practical things like income, housing, services, etc, it shows up most of all in attitudes:

– **in double standards**

- People are judged by appearances, clothes, accents, addresses/postcodes, carrier bags! occupation, etc, regardless of actual facts, so:
- One person gets a loan, another doesn't
- Made to feel inadequate in certain shops – 'not a typical M&S customer'
- Stigma – where delivery vans, taxis, etc, won't go
- Double standards on whether you are a working tenant or a benefits tenant, council or private
- Double standards on single parents – 'feckless', 'can't be trusted'
- Middle-class complaints more likely to be taken seriously than those of poor people

– **in disrespectful services**

- Assumptions about undeserving, so O.K. to treat people disrespectfully
- Police, housing department, social work, doctors, to them we're 'social problems'

– **and in loss of control over one's own life and dignity**

- Rich people talking about how poor people use their money
- Made to feel like a child – not treated as an adult
- Supported is assumed to mean 'childlike'
- Information is held on you, by doctors, chemists, private companies, finance companies, police, electoral register, and through your postcode which can be used in damaging and prejudicial ways. You have no access to it and no control over it!
- Dependent on other people's assessment of you, often with little knowledge
- Confidences are abused
- Privacy and sense of self violated

Their experience of being poor in Britain today is the experience of **radical inequality**; not only inequality of outcomes, of opportunity, and of expectations, but also of services, of standards, of attitudes and of dignity afforded. It is the experience of racism against the race of those who live in poverty.

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