

Towards a Theology of Scottish Liberation

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1. Changing Church

On Clydeside in Glasgow, beside the early 19th-century Catholic Cathedral, there now stands a substantial modern glass building reminiscent of an oil company HQ or international bank. It is the new Curia for the Archdiocese of Glasgow, a gleaming symbol that the Catholics 'have arrived'. Inside, the presence of a portrait of the Queen alongside one of the Pope underlines the political message behind the concrete and tinted glass. Catholics in the West of Scotland have come out of their mental and physical ghettos and now feel secure enough to take to task, in a much more critical manner than hitherto, the establishments which govern Scottish society.

In one sense, it is amazing that the Scottish hierarchy, of all episcopal conferences, should take such a consistently radical stance, though I am sure most bishops would baulk at the phrase. The change was a long time in coming, in part because of the introversion of native Scottish Catholics and in part because the incoming Irish kept their heads below the parapet and concentrated on material improvements for their community. They faced considerable prejudice from a Presbyterian Scotland where the calvinistic version of the Reformation had taken deeper root than anywhere else in Western Europe. 1923 is not that long ago—the time when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland approved a report on '*The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality*'. It was little wonder that the Catholic bishops kept *stumm* on social issues.

Yet lay Catholics, after 1906 and the emergence of the Catholic Socialist Society, gradually took an active part in Labour Party politics, breeding a mafia which is still strong in the City Chambers of Glasgow and other West of Scotland towns. A fear of Catholics moving further to the left led to clerical acceptance of the Labour Party by the 1920's and, according to one historian, the 'Scottish Roman Catholic Church was on its way towards becoming one of the first national churches in the world to reach a *modus vivendi* with socialism'¹. Given the innate historical radicalism of Scottish politics, the move was inevitable and gave the Scottish bishops a suitable social context in which to allow the fresh breezes of Vatican II to stir the growing confidence of Scottish Catholics into social action.

The advent of Thatcherism, met with an almost atavistic loathing in

Scotland, has put the relations between Church and State back on the agenda. Whereas in England, the Church of England has been in the van of attack on the Government, in Scotland the limelight has been shared equally between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Catholic Bishops. This can be seen most dramatically in the positions taken by the Scottish Bishops on issues of justice and peace. The Scottish Justice and Peace Commission was hampered in its early years both by theological conservatism, believing in the dichotomy between political life and faith, and by a desire not to rock the boat too much, either in society or in the Church. Once the Commission was taken over in the 1980's by a Glasgow priest who had returned angry from eight years in Bangladesh, it took off, forcing the Scottish bishops to take stances on issues affecting Scotland, such as nuclear weapons and unemployment, and on issues linking Scotland with the wider world: South Africa and world development. At the same time, and as part of the same process, SCIAF (the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the Scottish equivalent of Cafod and Trocaire), grew to be the largest of the Scottish Aid agencies.

The very structure of the Commission changed to become more representative of grassroot (i.e. parish group) feeling. There are now about eighty groups, mostly small, scattered throughout Scotland's eight dioceses, usually at the fringes of parish life, but their effect on the Church's public profile far outweighs their size. These groups are encouraged to involve themselves in four areas of concern: social justice (poverty and unemployment issues), human rights (South Africa, women and Northern Ireland), world development (SCIAF's work) and peace. The Commission undertakes studies on these issues, presents papers to the Scottish Bishops' Conference and urges groups to deepen their thinking on these issues. The theory flows into practice through activities such as picketing the South African consulate, forming credit unions to allow the poor access to borrowing facilities at low rates of interest, and initiatives such as 'Just Concern', a fund started by Glasgow Justice and Peace activists to give those who benefited from tax changes a chance to share that wealth with those who lost through social security changes. The £6,000 so far collected is disbursed through projects such as the Gorbals Industries Project in the heartland of Glasgow's old slum area.

2. Nuclear Weapons

Not unreasonably, one of the most consistent campaigning issues for the Scottish bishops has been nuclear weapons. Scotland bristles with them. Governing a strategic part of the North Sea, Scotland has been used as a home, not only of Polaris nuclear submarines planted within 30 miles of Scotland's largest city, but of a whole battery of NATO nuclear installations that has earned the country the title of 'Fortress Scotland'.

For the bishops, the issue is not just to oppose nuclear weapons but to question the whole basis of the British Government's defence policy of nuclear deterrence. As early as 1982, the bishops stated in their Easter

message 'Disarmament and Peace'²: 'Are we prepared to risk the future of our world by gambling for peace with a nuclear deterrent?' They criticised weapons of 'so-called controlled capability' which, though not indiscriminately destructive, were rendered 'morally unacceptable' by the escalatory consequences of their use. Then, in a key paragraph, the bishops declared themselves 'perplexed' at the lack of verifiable information about the Government's preparations and intentions. They stated:

We do know that the policy is of deterrence, but we do not know what measure of retaliation is contemplated should deterrence appear to fail ... we should know whether a threat of retaliation with such weapons is likely to be implemented in the event of any attack or only in the case of a nuclear one. Whatever is done, will be done in our name and, in a democracy, with our presumed agreement. The conscience of a nation should not be compelled to hazard guesses against a background of an indefinite number of possibilities. (*ibid*)

This statement was followed up in 1985 by a forceful message on New Year's Day³, calling for a 'nuclear freeze', a mutually agreed halt to the production, testing and development of nuclear stockpiles. But the underlying moral position had already been made clear. The bishops in the 1982 statement concluded that 'if it is immoral to use these weapons, it is also immoral to threaten their use.' The Scottish hierarchy is, with the East German, alone in declaring the deterrence argument immoral.

3. Apartheid

The interest in Third World affairs has produced strong statements condemning U.S. interference in Nicaragua and El Salvador, while the reaction of the Scottish bishops to the Thatcherite state has not confined itself to domestic issues. In 1985, after the first official visit by a Scottish bishop to South Africa, the Justice and Peace Commission, with the bishops' approval, produced a statement which declared that South Africa was 'constituted on the basis of gross human deprivation and exploitation'⁴ because of apartheid. Successive British governments are attacked for refusing to support meaningful sanctions against South Africa, and British business taken to task for trading so freely with the apartheid state.

The statement goes on to discourage Scots from emigrating to South Africa as this 'ensures among us the continuation of the myth that the South African state is a legitimate protector of western standards' (*ibid*). It also urges a boycott of South African goods, and sporting, social and cultural links. The statement declares apartheid to be a 'denial of and indeed a threat to the Gospel precisely because it acts and sustains structures of sin in the name of Christian religion' (*ibid*).

The work of the Commission on South Africa has recently been intensified after a visit there earlier this year of Archbishop Thomas

Winning, President of the Scottish Bishops' Conference, Bishop John Mone, President of the Justice and Peace Commission, Sr Mary Kilpatrick, General Secretary of the Commission, and myself. In a strongly worded statement, the two bishops denounced apartheid as evil, called for the Government to impose sanctions (a call later repeated by Archbishop Winning in front of Chris Patten, then Minister in charge of Overseas Development), and pledged Scottish Catholics to work for a just and peaceful end to apartheid.

4. *Poll Tax*

The Community Charge, popularly known as the 'poll tax', to replace the rating system, was imposed on Scotland in April this year against the wishes of the vast majority of the country's elected representatives and therefore against the will of the Scottish people. The Thatcher Government, which Scots have consistently rejected root and branch at general, local and Euro election level (there are now no Conservative Euro seats in Scotland), has used Scotland as a testing ground before for controversial legislation. If the Scots, who are not 'one of us', do not kick up a fuss, presumably the logic goes, then the English, who are, will accept it. Never has this Government treated Scotland quite so contemptuously, however, as in the imposition of the poll tax and never has it united Scottish opinion so strongly against it.

The Catholic Church, in support of the stance of the Scottish TUC, has based its opposition on sound doctrine and analysis. The Scottish bishops have opposed the tax on three grounds: economic, political and cultural.

The economic reason is that generally the burden for paying for local services will fall on the less well-off sections of society and cause the poor to sink more deeply into penury, a neat reversal of the preferential option for the poor. The economic individualism criticised in *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Gaudium et Spes* has been allowed to flourish at the expense of the common good. According to the American Bishops' 'Economic Justice for All', taxes should be based on three principles: (a) they must raise adequate revenue, especially for the needs of the poor and vulnerable; (b) they should be progressive—those with most resources should pay at a higher rate; (c) those already disadvantaged must not be burdened with extra taxation. The poll tax flies in the face of all these principles.

Politically, the tax, by being first imposed on one part of the U.K., breaks one of the clauses of the Treaty of Union between England and Scotland. The tax was also imposed over the heads of the elected representatives of the Scottish people in an extraordinary flouting of democracy. It greatly increases central government control over local authority spending and infringes the principle of subsidiarity, laid down by Pope Pius XI: 'It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher

corporation functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies.’⁵ It will also encourage people to disenfranchise themselves if they see this as an escape from a tax the poor can ill afford.

Culturally, the tax will cause a reduction in, or increased prices for, local services such as transport, health, libraries, etc., the things which Pope John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, states all citizens should be able to share no matter their income. Above all, the poll tax offends the notion of the common good. Archbishop Winning, on behalf of the Scottish Bishops, joined with the leaders of the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church in condemning the tax ‘prompted by considerations of social justice, which is an imperative of our Christian faith’⁶ and all parishes were circulated with anti-poll tax petitions.

The Catholic Church has, as a result, been attacked by the small fundamentalist right within its own ranks, especially through the pages of the now defunct Lefebvrist magazine, *Approaches*, and by a small band of elected (and larger band of unelected) Tories who predictably want the priest to remain in his temple. Yet only 10 of Scotland’s 72 MPs are Conservatives and the Labour Party has, in the Catholic vote, even the middle class vote, one of the most loyal voting blocs in Europe. It is a source of chagrin to Mrs Thatcher that, despite all the materialistic carrots she has dangled in front of the middle-class Scot, though most have nibbled, few have swallowed them whole. The Church’s stance on such issues as the poll tax and on individual social justice issues such as factory closures has gained the Church increased respect in Scottish society at large.

5. The Constitutional Question and the Future

So far, this article has set out issues on which the Scottish Catholic hierarchy has little difficulty in acting the disobedient servant of the British State. It experiences more problems when the issue at stake is constitutional, yet in Scotland’s present parlous state (which author William McIlvanney writes could lead to Scotland becoming ‘shallower and shallower until it succumbs to being just a further expression of the non-dialectical materialism of contemporary British politics’⁷), the constitutional question is central. It affects everything in Scottish society, from economics to culture, because it concentrates on what we Scots least like to face—our powerlessness.

During the 1979 Referendum to decide on a Scottish Assembly, the message from the hierarchy was ambiguous, to say the least. There was fear about the future of Catholic schools, and about Presbyterian domination, leading to a constitutionalised *Rangersism*. This fear was played on both by the Conservatives (who pulled Northern Ireland out of the hat in the relevant areas) and the ‘Labour Says No’ Campaign (the Assembly was officially Labour Party policy, but internal dissent is inevitable when expediency beats conviction in drawing up a manifesto).

Now the constitutional question looms even larger. A ‘Claim of

Right for Scotland' has been drawn up by a wide spectrum of Scottish opinion, and the resulting Scottish Convention, supported by the churches, meets to draw up proposals for a Scottish Assembly. Their frustration with the electoral process is clear. It has resulted in a Scotland 'being governed without consent and subject to the declared intention of having imposed upon it a radical change of outlook and behaviour pattern which it shows no sign of wanting'.⁸

Yet the basis for a Scottish Parliament in social doctrine, a sort of '*theology of Scottish liberation*' if you like, is indisputable. Pope John Paul II encapsulates the current Scottish dilemma in *Redemptor Hominis*: 'The essential sense of the state, as a political community, consists in that the society and the people composing it are master and sovereign of their own destiny. This sense remains unrealised if, instead of the exercise of power with the moral participation of the society or people, what we see is the imposition of power by a certain group upon all the other members of society.'⁹ More recently, the right of small nations to preserve their identities and to seek self-determination was also recognised by 95% of the delegates at the 1989 European Assembly on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation at Basel.¹⁰

It is evident that political power can only be exercised properly where the Government has a mandate from the people which the Scots have always denied the Thatcher Government, yet it imposes laws applicable only to Scotland through policies very different from the consensus policies of the pre-1979 era. The Thatcher Government has no *moral* mandate to govern Scotland. In a recent poll¹¹, only 14% of those questioned said that the Tories had a moral right to impose legislation on Scotland. The reaction to nuclear weapons and to the deterrent, together with the prospect of using the 'Fortress' for dumping nuclear waste, needs further to be seen in the light of a response to a government and a process alien to the deep-seated political convictions of Scots. The present situation continuously undermines the principle of subsidiarity by concentrating power in central government in London, in an administration out of sympathy with the Scottish political tradition, current or past. That it does not take account of the common good is self-evident, given that the gap between rich and poor in Scotland has risen spectacularly, resulting in one in three Scots being on or below the poverty line.

By a more enthusiastic response towards the move to set up a Scottish Parliament, the Scottish bishops will be rendering the creaking British constitution, such as it is, a favour. They would be stressing that governments exist to serve, not to be served; that solidarity consists in the participation of all the people in building a community; that action on behalf of justice for the Scottish as well as for the English, Irish and Welsh, people is an essential part of preaching the Gospel. They would be following in the footsteps of the Polish and Irish episcopacies rather than the Cuban and Nicaraguan models in terms of accompanying the

people in a prophetic manner. And they would be underlining the fact that the problems confronting Scotland are problems of sovereignty 'not simply in the sense of the constitutional lawyer' but in terms of the basic question 'who is my Lord?'¹² In taking a courageous stand on the constitutional issue, the Scottish bishops will be loyal to that 'wider transnational community of charity' which can serve to 'combat the moral atomism, the belief in the primacy of individual desires, and the readiness to reduce human lives to material'¹³ that is the mark of the Thatcher State.

Scottish Catholics, when they finally shed the last vestige of what has become known as the 'Scottish cringe', will be following in a long tradition of the Scottish Church. In 1320, the Scottish bishops sent a message to the Pope regarding Scottish independence. In it, they declared that if the Scottish king betrayed them, then they would find another king to replace him because 'it is not for wealth or glory that we fight but for freedom alone which no man gives up save with his life.'¹⁴

While not exaggerating the extent or the influence of the Scottish Church on justice and peace issues, a small hierarchy has shown that the Gospel can be preached through public statements to fulfil the Church's role as institution and people to comment on the politics of our time with fortitude, to 'name the sin and the salvation'¹⁵.

- 1 Tom Gallagher: 'Catholics in Scottish Politics', *Bulletin of Scottish Politics*, Spring 1981.
- 2 'Disarmament and Peace', Communications Commission 1982.
- 3 Peace Day Statement, 1st January 1985, Communications Commission.
- 4 'South Africa and Scotland', Communications Commission 1985.
- 5 *Quadragesimo Anno* 79.
- 6 Poll Tax Statement, December 1987.
- 7 William McIlvanney: 'The Shallowing of Scotland: 2', *Glasgow Herald*, 25 March 1989.
- 8 Owen Dudley Edwards, ed.: *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, Polygon, Edinburgh 1989, p. 50.
- 9 *Redemptor Hominis* 17.5.
- 10 Final Document, Basel 1989.
- 11 Mori Poll, *Scotland on Sunday*, 5 March 1989.
- 12 Tim Duffy: 'Church and Nation: A Catholic View', Edinburgh 1989 (private paper). My thanks to the author for other thoughts here.
- 13 Nicholas Boyle: 'Understanding Thatcherism', *New Blackfriars*, July/August 1988.
- 14 Declaration of Arbroath 1320.
- 15 Albert Nolan: *God in South Africa*, CIIR, London 1988.