

THE BECKLY SOCIAL SERVICE LECTURE

Self-Interest and the Common Good: aspects for a Political Theology for Europe.

John Kennedy has the knack of putting unusual ideas together and forcing them to throw light on each other. Sometimes that feels like hammering obstinate square pegs into unyieldingly round holes. At other times it's as if he'd put someone from the High Command of the IRA into the same room as Dr Ian Paisley for a discussion of sweetness and light. Sparks are guaranteed but, as the mind accustoms itself to the unexpected juxtapositions, stunningly fresh ideas do sometimes emerge to surprise and enliven us. Something like that seems to me to be at work in his contribution to tonight's debate which he roots in his reflexions on Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli, after all, hasn't had a good press. Indeed, his name has provided an adjective synonymous with the shadier side of politics; much of what he's written sets out to justify despots in their tyranny and he's a past master in the use and abuse of intrigue to get things done. Buzz words from our contemporary political discourse, words like transparency, open government, accountability, freedom of information, are at the opposite pole from so much of his thinking. He'd have been a clear candidate for investigation by Sir Gordon Downey.

For all that, it's impossible to dismiss him out of hand. So I want to start where John does, in Florence at the turn of the 16th century.

I

There's a point of easy agreement to register right at the outset. Girolamo Savonarola's efforts to declare a crusade against the corruption and immorality of the city by turning it into a theocracy was doomed from the start. Complex human societies cannot easily be subjected to any flattened or monochrome ideology, however worthy. We should always treat with the greatest suspicion any attempts to establish

- rule by the righteous [hagiocracy?] where the saints go marching in; or

- any equivalent of the *piagnoni* [e.g. thought police, tontons macoutes, red brigades, vigilante groups, the Stasi].

The recognition that human societies are inevitably pluralistic seems to me to be a basic premise for the development of a viable political model and we ought all to be grateful to Machiavelli for making that so abundantly clear in all his thinking and writing about the nature of the Good Republic.

When philosophers or political theorists or those who hold power begin to use God to justify their ideas or to undergird the legitimacy of their rule, we should all invoke the third commandment and run for cover. Those who make such claims should beware lest, as Phillips Brooks put it, they "belittle God with their own littleness." Or else, to put a different spin on it, the dangerous vocable "God" should never be resorted to as a justification for narrow-minded, tyrannical, programmes of government where violence (whether physical, intellectual or spiritual) might well be unleashed in a holy assault on the supposed citadels of infidelity, immorality and corruption.

It wouldn't take much effort to compare Savonarola's Florence to Calvin's Geneva, Hasidic Jerusalem, Marxist Moscow or the Taliban's Kabul. Politics is and will always remain the art of the possible. It must never be allowed to become an inflexible, ideologically-driven fundamentalism of any kind. And certainly, it must never be a programme imposed in the name of the divine being.

II

If we can secure agreement on this first point without too much trouble, perhaps we'll need to work a little harder to reach an accord on the second. Central to John's thesis is the notion of "self-interest." Livy's notion that "fortune favours the brave" is taken a step further by Machiavelli who argues that "virtue" is "the complex of qualities required by the successful in pursuit of fortune." The *virtuoso* is the man who shows enterprise, seizes the initiative and gets on his bike (to quote another more recent Machiavellian). The successful man gets a handle on "what works at the time," he is the very model of post-modern hugger mugging. *Carpe diem*, as another Italian once said, *quam minimum credulo postero*. [Seize the moment; set no store by tomorrow.] The energy for the successful ordering of the Good Republic, its lifeblood even, is provided precisely by this magical quality "self-interest" which gives people the capacity and the motivation to get on and do things, to make them happen.

This making-things-happen approach stands, or so the argument goes, in stark contrast to the meek complaisance of traditional Christian teaching which "glorifies humble and contemplative men," rather than "men of action." It's this distinction that lies at the heart of John's case. Lavish praise is heaped upon Machiavelli for recognizing self-interest as the only motor which can drive "the Good Republic" in a way that works for the benefit of all. But is John right to describe concepts like humility, charity, suffering, patience, self denial and even love as if they were merely passive and submissive experiences or attributes? I understand why he does this.

It allows him to make out of them a man of straw which he can then knock over without too much effort. But is he right to do this? And is it true that Christians seek to "harmonise" things (another sign of their meekness) and that this instinct is necessarily at odds with the rough realities of a world where the real political task is the "perpetual and never resolved negotiation of interests?" Is it true that ideas about the sovereignty of God are at odds with the contingent nature of the human republic?

John Kennedy is happy to applaud the German churches for their "frankness about the existence of interests and appetites in society at large." By contrast, he is highly critical of the British churches for their bland assumptions about the nature of political activity. The Roman Catholic Church, he reminds us, in its important document *The Common Good*, "proposes a calm rationality, a coherence of interests and convictions impossible in a free society." All this is part and parcel of "the failure to establish the moral validity of self-interest" and this is, in his view, "a strong feature of the thinking of the British Churches." He is particularly critical of the tendency of our churches to equate the market with evil and to do this by shutting our eyes to that essential pre-requisite, self-interest, which for us moderns (and post moderns) just as much as for Machiavellian medievals is the only quality capable of achieving any project worthy of calling itself "the Good Republic."

What I suspect John has unwittingly been doing, in order to make his point as clearly as possible, is to put the very best gloss on what he's presenting as "self-interest" and to oppose that with all the self-abnegatory aspects of traditional Christian attitudes as if that's all they consisted of. I would reply quite simply that if *we* are to heed *his* word about the tendency of the Church to produce handwringingly bland social teaching which fails to be assertive enough on questions (for example) relating to wealth creation, or to deal adequately with the ferocious competitive forces abroad in the land, then *I* would argue with equal vehemence that *he* needs to recognize just how easily his much vaunted "self-interest" itself slips off into dangerous areas, into the tyrannies of injustice and into providing a moral basis for the creation of unequal societies. Again and again, to use his own words, the *Ottimati* [the men of substance] have become detached from the Republic, driven by opportunistic greed, to line their own pockets and further their own vested interests. History is full of such stories.

That shouldn't surprise us. Of course it shouldn't. Long before Machiavelli's time, Plato offered his view of the Republic and put forward several possible ideas of how to build it. First of all, he put forward the thinking of Cephalus. No doubt John would have considered this too wet,

too "Christian" even. After all, Cephalus was silly enough to think justice meant "honesty in word and deed". Polemarchus, in suggesting that justice means "giving every man his due", showed himself a little on the damp side too. Even Socrates with his outrageous notion that the Republic should be ruled by Kings who were also Philosophers turned out to be decidedly revisionist in this area. From the argument he's presented this evening it would seem that John Kennedy would prefer to go into the lobby with that other participant in Plato's debate, Thrasymachus, who seems totally imbued with the idea of "self-interest" in its most brutal form. Indeed, he sowed a few seeds for Machiavelli to harvest fifteen hundred years later. For Thrasymachus, justice is nothing less than "the interest of the stronger". He even concluded that injustice was likely to be more profitable than justice. "Right and wrong," he ranted, "have no meaning other than the interest of the ruling or stronger party." It's the despot who turns out, in the gospel according to Thrasymachus, to be the supremely enviable person who can "impose his rights, help his friends, and harm his enemies." Let this be a warning of just where unbridled self-interest has led us time and again. *Caveat emptor*. Thus spake Thrasymachus. Thus spake also Niccolò Machiavelli.

And thus spake Michael Howard too! I've had exchanges of correspondence with our emeritus Home Secretary dating back many years. I wrote to him when he was Minister for the Environment on the precise question of self-interest. "Is the view of Thrasymachus, that justice can be defined as the interest of the strongest, supportable?" I asked impertinently. For good measure I threw in a supplementary question: "Are monetary incentives the only trigger to get people working?" I wanted to know whether he felt that self-interest is best defined solely in financial terms? His reply is illuminating. He referred to "ladders of opportunity for all," but was clear that people would only climb them if lured by monetary incentives. "I do think that history demonstrates," he wrote, "that they are by far the most effective in inspiring hard work and greater effort in most people." And, he concluded, "*I would argue that all other efforts to construct a society on any other basis have failed.*"

Michael Howard says repeatedly that he came into politics because he wanted to make society a better place. But, he wrote, "although morality may provide a good push at the start [of one's political life], it's not really much use as a navigational aid once you've started the journey." Indeed, he goes further. "It's possible to approach [practical issues in politics] on the basis of some kind of moral masochism which would claim that we'd be better off spiritually if we were all poorer." Here, it seems to me, he joins ranks with John Kennedy in caricaturing the views of "spiritual" people; what

John calls "self-denial," Michael Howard calls "moral masochism." But their agreement doesn't lie simply around the negative point. The positive spin also sees them in uncanny unison. They see self-interest mainly in terms of money with wealth creation as the primary end of political endeavour. For them, effort and energy are released above all by financial incentives. And I want to sound the alarm bells at this simplification which, while it may well understand the cost of everything will run the real danger of having no idea at all about the value of anything.

We can say with confidence that self-interest runs the danger of becoming *self-interest*; that any notion of enlightened self-interest can too easily develop into *unenlightened* self-interest. We must, of course, encourage, stimulate and channel people's perfectly normal aspirations for personal advancement, security and fulfilment. But we must always be on our guard against any understanding of self-interest where it degenerates into self-aggrandizement, arrogance or greed. We must build proper safeguards in the form of regulation and a monitoring of the key elements of our economic life to avoid this. John admits as much in one part of his paper. But I'm not sanguine on this point. My conversation with bankers, economists and leading people in the City, suggests that they hate all ideas of regulation. They are impervious to the argument that the *ottimati* are capable of detaching themselves from the Republic. Nor do they heed Professor James Mirrlees's teaching that information in the supposedly free and unfettered market place is a-symmetrical; that is, knowledge is unevenly spread. Some people *know* more than others and they are always the ones who make a killing. Self-interest in its imperialist sense is a sure formula for disaster.

For all my gloom, however, I begin to detect another and far more reassuring understanding of self-interest creeping into public discourse. I'll just offer three examples:

(a) The Prime Minister, in his recent address to the United Nations earth summit, spoke eloquently of the need for the world community to work positively towards a better treatment of our environment. He urged world leaders, including and especially those in developed countries, to set measurable targets for the emission of CS gases in order to protect the ozone layer and reduce the risks of continued global warming. He made his appeal in terms of self-interest, a self-interest which expressed itself not so much in the familiar terms of growth, expansion and the increase of personal wealth but rather as a concern for the well-being of our children and future generations. Special efforts need to be made now, by us, for their benefit.

(b) At a meeting of the Board of Christian Aid last week, I heard reports of meetings with the new Minister of Development. She is setting achievable targets to help her plan the best use of the British aid budget. All in all, she wants her own department and those of other governments in the western world, to achieve a 50% reduction in levels of global poverty by the year 2015. She describes this ambitious plan as "the self-interest case for development." She sees the improvement of world poverty and a more just economic order as something from which the rich and powerful nations as well as the poor will benefit.

(c) There's an exciting piece of work being undertaken in the Middle East by members of the three great monotheistic religions present there. It's called the Abraham project and it identifies its immediate aim thus: "As a first step towards real security, Jews and Arabs in Israel must learn to co-exist because there is no alternative. Co-existence is the minimal, least demanding way for people to relate to each other positively." For Israel, read Ireland, Cyprus, Kashmir, or even Hong Kong. Self-interest is here too being defined as the surrender of traditional territorial and the exclusive goals of proprietorship. It's in giving that we receive. True self-interest has to be fostered through models of accommodation rather than acquisition.

Moral masochism? Or realistic attitudes? I leave you to decide for yourselves.

III

John has properly shown how important are the key concepts of "subsidiarity" and "solidarity" in the search for a successful European political model. I developed my own thinking around these ideas in my 1995 Tawney lecture which I gave for the Christian Socialist Movement in All Saints Church, Margaret Street. I want to say no more here. These concepts are fundamental if we're to build a sense of true community in a continent where differences of culture and the dreadful history of recent times could so easily achieve opposite and narrower ideals. And certainly we in Britain must see through the tabloid plot that presents subsidiarity, and solidarity too, as a betrayal of our sovereignty and nationhood. Self-interest for the British people at this time lies in finding the most appropriate ways of surviving and developing in a competitive world in a truly European way, transcending narrow nationalism, breaking out of the prison of our imperial past, forgetting most of that stuff about our sceptered isle and rule Britannia and foreign fields that are forever England. Instead, we'd do better to

remember the injunction that when seeds fall into the ground and die there is still a great deal to hope for.

The Exodus is arguably the most powerful paradigm in the Bible. It has inspired liberation movements and oppressed peoples across the centuries. Puritans, Boers and Mormons have used it as their model as they trekked towards their new futures. Civil rights activists, feminists, black and liberation theologians have also appealed to the Exodus as their model. It's been a powerful motor. But it has a danger to it.

The important way to check out whether the Exodus paradigm is being used appropriately is what I'd call "the Deuteronomy 7.2" test. There we read how the peoples who already lived in the land of promise, the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites were to be treated. I quote: "You shall utterly destroy them, you shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy to them." No frills about this message. Exterminate the lot of them and impose yourself ruthlessly in the land they now occupy. Deuteronomy 7.2 is still a gun in the hand of those ultra-Conservative Jews in Israel who've opposed any notion of land for peace in the search for an accommodation with the Palestinian people. The words, "destroy them," "make no covenant with them," "show them no mercy," have been evident again and again in political as well as religious discourse.

Deuteronomy offers a classic example of how history is written to buttress a particular view of the world and your own place in it. Tenth century historians, writing at a time when Israel was enjoying peace and prosperity, explained the Exodus as part of God's plan to bring his people to precisely the glorious settlement they were then enjoying. Deuteronomy 7.2 means what it says. They could legitimately kick out all those other peoples with their idolatrous ways and corrupt culture. They wrote a history of these events from the vantage point of national success. It was unashamedly triumphalist and exclusive.

Five hundred years later, after Israel had suffered its second humiliation in just over a hundred years, losing territory and dignity and with its leaders carted off into a tearful exile, historians had to look at things in an entirely different way. The writer of Isaiah 40-55, for example, had to rework the Exodus theme altogether. It was no longer possible to glow with pleasure at all those military victories that led to Israel's establishment in the promised land. Now they were down on their luck and at their wits' end. Was God leading them through another wilderness experience? If so, why? And then the prophet produced a rabbit from his hat. He proposed a solution to

the conundrum by suggesting that Israel was indeed experiencing the wilderness all over again. But this time Mount Zion was going to replace Mount Sinai in God's great plan, and it would be *all* the nations, rather than just Israel, which would be involved in the action. Israel was now to see itself not as the great exterminator of other nations but as a light to lighten them within a new economy of grace. It's arguable that the history and theology formulated by the prophets during this time of national humiliation raised levels of self-understanding and an awareness of the nature and will of God to their very loftiest and most noble.

All this might be helpful as we consider tonight's theme. It's arguable that what the years 722 B.C. and 586 B.C. did to lick Israel's self-understanding into more realistic shape, the years 1914 A.D. and 1939 A.D. did for Europe. They destroyed forever the liberal Protestant assumptions about the perfectibility of Man and the inevitability of progress and hastened the day when German, Belgian, French, Danish, Dutch and British imperialism would collapse. For a while, Marxism threatened to oust the prevailing Judaeo-Christian order of things. But the years following 1989 have seen the end of its delusions too.

The new political order for post-World War II Europe was rooted in a rebuilding of the coal and steel industries on a transnational basis. Brussels should never be allowed to become a modern day swear word as the word *Bulgar* once did. Rather, it should be seen as a very serious attempt to shape European interdependence. Brussels gives the lie to all those imperialist histories which showed the nations of Europe in Mike Tyson style, ready to bite off the ears of anyone who got in their way. Like Isaiah, the shapers of modern Europe have had to come to terms with military defeat and national disgrace. They've pinned their hopes on a plan for all the nations. Lions will lie down with lambs and war will be banished only when the nations gather together around the idea that *self-interest* and the *common* good are inevitably inter-related. And if that goes against the thinking of Niccolò Machiavelli, tough.