

Introduction

Background

The provision of welfare is germane to much of Christ's teaching, not least His depiction of how one can inherit the kingdom:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'¹

It is on that basis, writing as a Christian, that the idea for this book emerged out of a sense of bewilderment I had about a change in direction the Church of England had taken to welfare following the financial crash of 2008, when, in 2010, it offered qualified support to the Coalition government's 'Big Society' project. This was an initiative that sought to rebalance welfare provision in the United Kingdom – by making it less statist and more localist and voluntarist in its delivery. As such, the thinking underpinning that project challenged some of the assumptions on which the post-war British Welfare State had been founded. Prior to 2010 the Church of England had been a staunch defender of the Welfare State. The favourable response it gave to the 'Big Society' project during its first two years, suggested a paradigm shift may have occurred in its thinking on welfare, and I wanted to identify and scrutinise the reasons

¹. Matthew 25: 34–36. *New King James Version Reference Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2019).

for that change of direction, as well as the implications stemming from it for those in need of welfare provision, then and since.

The Church of England has played an important role as a provider of welfare throughout its history and particularly since the early nineteenth century; it has also contributed substantially to shaping the way welfare has been provided by others – including governments of the day. Yet, the Church of England's level of influence on shaping the political landscape is not what it once was. This partly reflects the steep decline in affiliation and observance that it has witnessed since the early 1960s, which forms part of the context for this study. Despite that trend, however, the extent to which, in 2010, the Cameron-led Coalition government called upon the Church of England to deliver on key aspects of its 'Big Society' project suggests that its influence on shaping, and, in part, delivering on a government's welfare agenda, is far from negligible. It also remains one of the largest providers of welfare in the UK. These are reasons why the approach it takes to welfare matters: to its affiliates; to affiliates of other Christian denominations; to members of faith-based organisations that are not Christian but which see the provision of welfare as a vital component of a civil society; to those of no faith who take the same view; and to all those who find themselves in need of welfare support. It therefore merits academic and wider, societal scrutiny, as the consequences – not least for the poorest in society – can be considerable, and it is for that reason that I felt drawn to undertake this study.

The influence that, since 2008, John Milbank has had on reshaping the welfare agenda in the Church of England and, since 2010 – via his input into the Blue Labour project – the welfare agenda in the Labour Party has been considerable, as have the consequences for the Church of England. Milbank is a theologian with an international reputation who has made a substantial contribution to Anglo-Catholic theology, particularly since the publication of his major work, *Theology and Social Theory*, in 1990.² His founding, in the late 1990s, of radical orthodoxy, the theological school that has since gained a reputation for being one of the most influential on post-modern and post-liberal approaches to Catholic orthodoxy, has further cemented his reputation as an important thinker for his times. Moreover, since 2008, in a flurry of journalistic and other, more academic, writings, Milbank has made a concerted effort to apply some of his theological insights to the contemporary British

² J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

political context, not least with regard to the provision of welfare. These works are the sources of much of the analysis that follows and have been written in a more accessible style than has been his trademark.

As Milbank's thinking on welfare can be located in one strand of Anglican Socialist thought, it is examined by looking at it through the lens of the Anglican Socialist tradition. His writings – on the rise of capitalism and the modern, Western state, Christian Socialism, Blue Socialism, Blue Labour, post-liberalism, the British Welfare State, voluntarism, the 'Big Society' project, and the Church of England's post-war role in the provision of welfare – feature prominently in what is the first analysis and evaluation of Milbank's Blue Socialist thinking on welfare *vis-à-vis* its influence within the Church of England. The Anglican Socialist tradition has also played an important part in shaping the Church of England's positioning on welfare since the middle of the nineteenth century,³ and this book explores that aspect of its history and the part it played in influencing its handling of the 'Big Society' project.

Blue Labour advocates, such as Milbank, see the Welfare State as an overly centrist, bureaucratic, often remote and inefficient welfare delivery vehicle, favouring a more voluntarist and localist approach to aspects of welfare provision currently being provided by the state. As such, since 2009, they have offered the Labour Party a more radical, alternative approach to welfare than anything it has seen since the founding of the Welfare State in the 1940s: one that challenges the Fabian-inspired, social democratic thinking on welfare that it had embraced since the early 1920s, and which, in the immediate post-war years, had underpinned much of the Attlee administration's drive to establish a welfare state, and which was so influential on shaping aspects of Labour's post-war defence of it. It is because of its radical departure from Labour's post-war positioning on welfare that the Blue Labour political phenomenon merits critical assessment, not least for those who see it as a threat to the Welfare State and the social democratic ideology that underpins it.

³. For more on this see, for example, M. Brown (ed.), *Anglican Social Theology* (Croydon: Church House Publishing, 2014); M. Chapman, *Bishops, Saints and Politics* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); M. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); D. Nicholls, *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1989); S. Spencer (ed.), *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2017).

Milbank was also influential in shaping Red Tory thinking on welfare that emerged in 2009–10 – principally in the writings of Phillip Blond,⁴ one of his former PhD students. This was also highly critical of the post-war, welfare state settlement and for similar reasons to how Blue Labour thinkers had come to see it. Red Tory thinking was also influential in shaping aspects of Prime Minister Cameron's political outlook, and his support for the 'Big Society' project reflected that. Yet, it is the influence Milbank has had on reshaping the Church of England's strategic thinking and policy formulation on welfare since 2008 that this book is primarily concerned with examining.

My Approach

Writing as a Christian, does not, I would argue, preclude one from examining this subject from a standpoint that places a need for historical evidence to be at the centre of one's interpretation of past events, and fully respects the need for academic detachment in the way one examines it, whilst acknowledging that the study of history can never be a totally objective science.⁵ It is on that basis that, on one level, this book can be seen as a study in the history of ideas as well as one in contemporary political theology, as the approach throughout has been to examine these events by setting them in their wider political, historical and theoretical context. A wide range of historical sources has been examined, including a number of official Church documents. Yet, there will always be a question about how far documents, however 'official', actually speak for, or describe accurately, the Church's attitudes/views at a given point in time. Like all forms of historical evidence, they have their limitations in what they can reveal about the past, not least when one is writing about an organisation as complex as the Church of England. What may have been the views of members of the House of Bishops at a synod, for example, as recorded in the minutes, or the views of a church committee as recorded in an official report, cannot be assumed to have been those held by the congregants on the pews, for which there may be no historical record. Accepting the limitations

⁴ P. Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

⁵ A useful introduction to this topic can be found in M.D. Chapman, 'The History of Theology and Historical Theology', in Chapman, *Bishops, Saints and Politics*, pp. 1–6.

inherent in the use of historical documents as sources of evidence on which to base one's interpretation of past events does not invalidate that approach, however. What it does do is make writing about history an imperfect quest, but an important one, nevertheless, if we are to learn anything from the past.

The Book's Structure

The book is split into three parts. Part One sets the scene by analysing three strands of the Anglican Socialist tradition with specific reference to their perspectives on welfare and the Church. It also provides a summary analysis of the history of welfare provision in Britain since the early twentieth century. This enables Milbank's thinking on welfare and the Church to be examined in historical and theoretical context, as a contribution to the Anglican Socialist tradition out of which it has emerged (Part Two), before examining it in the context of the Church of England's relation to the political field of welfare since 2008 and, specifically, its response to the 'Big Society' project (Part Three). It also enables the Church of England's handling of the 'Big Society' project to be examined in historical and theoretical context (Part Three).

Part One

Part One provides a historical and theoretical backdrop on the origins of the British Welfare State and the post-war welfare state consensus and its collapse, as seen through the lens of the Anglican Socialist tradition. In chapter one, I describe three distinct strands of Anglican Socialist thinking on the modern state. These have shaped their advocates' views on the role the state should perform in the transition to a Christian socialist society, and the role the Church might play in that process, not least with respect to its interface with the state's welfare arm. I examine how two of these strands remain highly relevant for locating and understanding the role the Church of England might perform in the provision of welfare in the future.

John Milbank's thinking on welfare and the Church is also considered. In chapter two his Blue Socialist outlook is contrasted with R.H. Tawney's perspective on the state and welfare. David Nicholls' thinking – including its influence in bringing about a revival of interest in English political pluralism since the early 1970s and on shaping aspects

of Milbank's later thinking – is also examined. Milbank's thinking in relation to the two dominant strands of economic perspective that have characterised the post-war history of the welfare state consensus and its collapse – Keynesianism for the period 1945–76 and neoliberalism for the period since – is also analysed.

Part Two

Part Two examines the Blue Socialist thinking of John Milbank with reference to its key theoretical underpinnings and to some alternative perspectives and criticisms of them. In chapter three I analyse his perspectives on the Middle Ages, the Reformation, Protestantism and the rise of capitalism, the Church and the modern, liberal-capitalist state, and Christian Socialism. I also provide arguments that challenge Milbank's historical perspective on religion and the rise of capitalism, as well as his thinking on Blue Socialism. Chapter four provides an evaluation of Milbank's Blue Socialist perspective on the Welfare State *vis-à-vis* the voluntary sector, and the Church of England's post-war role in the provision of welfare, and his proposed Blue Socialist, post-liberal alternative vision of the role he argues the Church of England should perform in the provision of welfare.

Part Three

Chapter five explores whether the thinking on welfare in the Church of England in the period since 2008, particularly its handling of the 'Big Society' project, can be located in the themes and perspectives on the Church, state and welfare that have been developed by writers from within two strands of the Anglican Socialist tradition. It examines John Milbank's Blue Socialist thinking on the 'Big Society' project, and the influence it had on shaping the Church of England's response to it, in the context of other perspectives from within Anglican Socialism, and from within the Radical Orthodoxy grouping as regards Phillip Blond's *Red Tory* analysis. The chapter also examines whether the Church of England's positioning on welfare underwent a paradigm shift in 2010.

In chapter six I offer some reflections on the research and its findings and, based on them, reach conclusions to the lines of argument that are relevant for shaping the Church of England's approach to welfare henceforth.

An epilogue briefly considers the events that have taken place since I completed my research for this book in early 2020; specifically, the implications the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the public purse may have for the conclusions that I have reached on the shaping of the Church of England's approach to welfare in the years to come.

Consistent with the decision to examine these matters through the lens of a historical tradition – Anglican Socialism, Part One focuses on providing a historical and theoretical backdrop to much of what follows.

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