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"STEPPING OUT OF BABYLON: THEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE THOUGHT OF DAVID NICHOLLS"

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On hearing the news of David's death, his dear friend Fr Percy Coleman commented: 'David did not care about the world -yet he cared passionately about the world.' In this Zen-like, typically 'Percyan' utterance, he captured the heart, the dialectical core, of David Nicholls's thought: worldly and otherworldly, caring nothing for worldly power and status, caring deeply about justice and mercy in the world.

David Nicholls was both a political theorist and a theologian. His political work involved the study of pluralism in the thought of JN Figgis, the political history of Haiti from Dessalines to Duvalier, and, in the years before his death, the relationship between political structures and images of God, the subject of his Hulsean Lectures. Two volumes, *Deity and Domination* and *God and Government,* have appeared. He was a polymath: the political scientist; the theologian; the humble and caring parish priest in Littlemore; the polemical pamphleteer; the historian of the Caribbean; and so much else. Chris Rowland, in a talk given shortly after David's death, said that, while he was never part of the 'inner circle' of Oxford theology, he 'embodied in his life and writing all that is best in Oxford theology'. Many people knew only one or two sides of his life and work.

Yet I believe that there was a coherence, and that these were not separate worlds. The fact that we have kept the library together is important, for the library, with its amazing diversity, and yet coherence, is a symbol of David's own life and thought, marked equally by diversity and coherence. So the question I want to address is: How did his theology and his politics connect and cohere, and how did he see the connection and work out the coherence? I want to examine his thought from four perspectives: his understanding of religion and secularity; his approach to liberation and salvation; his doctrine of the church in its relation to the social order; and his understanding of conflict.

But it is also important to recognise three features of his life, theology, and character which are crucial: his polemical sense and style; his sense of humour; and his rootedness in a deep sense of the grace of God. I will say something about the first two now, and leave the third until later.

David thrived on controversy, though he could be hurt by some of its repercussions. He assumed that people would be mature enough to take attacks on board, and was at times surprised and saddened when this was not so. Much of his best writing was stimulated by argument and debate with others, and his positive ideas were stated in the context of disagreement. His mischievous sense of humour was notorious. His comic poems resembled those of Eric Mascall, and were often inspired by sentences in books or newspapers. Take, as a good example, his poetic reflection on Archbishop Donald Coggan's Call to the Nation of 1976, supported by his fellow Archbishop Stuart Blanch.

Said Primate Coggan to Primate Blanch
'I seem to sense an avalanche,
At any rate a serious drift'.
'You're right! The country needs a lift
On our toboggan',
Said Primate Blanch to Primate Coggan.

'We'll issue a Call to the Nation.
We don't want to make a sensation,
Just earnest debate.
Before it's too late,
And we're drowned in a vast inundation.

We do not address our appeal
To the gentry –who, on the whole, feel
That to work is a bore -,
Nor indeed to the poor,
Who are getting a pretty raw deal.

The people we're trying to reach
Are those in a family who each
Go out to a job
And earn a few bob,
Then attempt social contracts to breach.

They're guilty of guzzling and greed.
We're going to give them a lead,
And to show it's not hard,
We'll send them a card,
Briefly explaining our creed.

On it we invite them to share
Our concern for the nation, and care
For poor and for rich,
Not queering the pitch
Of our leaders –and also a prayer.

We're not in favour of piety
But influencing society
In a positive and very helpful way.
For the enemy's at the gate
And there's hardly time to wait,
So wake up Christians, clerical and lay,
And ask yourselves what sort
Of society we ought
To build in England's green and pleasant land.
Then we'll gladly lend a hand,
Building castles in the air,
With facades bright and fair,
And our feet planted firmly
In the sand.

But it was perhaps the figure of Archdeacon Paley, the parrot from Trinidad who was such a regular correspondent to *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, who best symbolised David's sense of mischief. (The parrot died ob 29th May, a few weeks before David himself died, and at least one obituary included them both.) When David smuggled the Archdeacon into the Oxford Diocesan Directory as an honorary curate, he received a severe letter from the bishop's chaplain to which he replied in characteristically satirical mode. His obituary for the archdeacon, submitted to *The Independent*, began: 'Archdeacon William Paley was one of the most colourful churchmen of his day.' It went on:

> He was firmly convinced that the attempt to apply business management techniques to the church was fundamentally misconceived, amounting to little less than a flight of fantasy. This was to have been the theme of his projected Bibfeldt Memorial Lecture in Chicago later this year.

It is difficult to separate the polemical style from the mischievous sense of humour. Take this reply to a letter in *The Times* from the Warden of All Souls, Oxford, John Sparrow, in 1978, which ended:

> If this is the first twittering of the sparrow to be recorded in your correspondence columns this season, let us hope that it is also the last.

Or his response to an article by Professor Norman Stone in *The Guardian* in 1990.

> I assumed at first that the article 'Dream that could become a nightmare' by Norman Stone was by the Oxford professor of history who goes by that name. On reading the article I concluded that this could not be so: historians are known to check their sources.

The letter ended:

> The author says twice that his heart goes out to Haiti. Don't the people of that benighted country have enough problems without having to embrace a heart of stone?

Or consider his review, in *Theology* of March 1988, of the major work of the Chicago theologian David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination.*

> Reading this book was like a long prison sentence in which the subject is continually calculating how much remains to be covered.

But perhaps the best example of David's polemical style is his Open Letter to the Bishop of Oxford, *Of Bishops and Biscuits, or How the Cookie Crumbled*, published in 1993 as a response to a pamphlet co-authored by the Bishop of Oxford and Lord Laing of Dunphail, Life President of United Biscuits. The pamphlet grew out of a working party composed of 'a retired banker, a retired senior civil servant, and the rector of that celebrated urban priority area Gerrards Cross'. One of its concerns was wealth production and distribution, and it made the familiar critique that the Church had been 'preoccupied with wealth distribution'. David commented:

> By which you no doubt means talking about the subject rather than doing it (though the Church Commissioners have, in the last few years, distributed –albeit involuntarily- some one-third of their capital assets.

More seriously, however, David pointed out that United Biscuits, of which one author was Life President, had, in 1992, contributed £130,000 to the funds of the Conservative Party, a party which 'believes in a massive redistribution of wealth, though not quite in the way prescribed by the Year of Jubilee.'

I am drawing in this lecture largely on writings of David which are probably not well known, and I do so for a very important reason. His large books were studies of political theory, pluralism, the political history of the Caribbean, and, more recently, studies of the political context of language about God, But to discover his theological ideas it is better to go to his sermons, his pamphlets for the Jubilee Group, and his occasional articles and letters to the press. Here is directness, simplicity and clarity, but also a strong sense of the need to engage the powerful in debate, To this task he brought all his gifts as a pamphleteer, very much in the tradition of Swift, Paine and Cobbett.

One of David's earliest articles must have been his contribution to *Prism* in July 1961 which incurred the wrath of both Alec Vidler in *Soundings* and John Robinson in *Honest to God.* The article was entitled 'Your God is too big', an adaptation of the title of J B Phillips's best selling paperback *Your God Is Too Small*. It showed David at his most contrary, the article being written at a time when the fashionable line was the opposite. Indeed, during these years there was great suspicion of religion itself, and Bonhoeffer's term 'religionless Christianity' was popular (not least among those who had not read Bonhoeffer and did not speak German!) Harvey Cox was soon to write *The Secular City*, Paul Van Buren *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, and so on. It was the dawning of what Stanley Evans once called 'the tautologically claimed secular age', for, as he pointed out, *saeculum* was the Latin word for 'age'!

It was against this background that David argued the case for religion and for the limited role of the Church. Robinson totally misunderstood him, assuming that he was arguing for a separation of religion from the affairs of the world. In fact, his point was about the value of the secular, and the danger that religion –and the Church- might get too big for their boots! The Church's failure was a failure to have offered religion at a time when people were seeking it. The central point of the article was this.

> Religion is not concerned with the whole of life, but with a part of life. We must….. increase our emphasis upon the Church as a religious organisation with a limited purpose.

His view was, on the surface, exactly the opposite of that expressed by Alasdair MacIntyre in his first book, *Marxism: an interperetation*, published by SCM Press in 1953. It began:

> The division of human life into the sacred and the secular is one that comes naturally to western thought. It is a division which at one and the same time bears the marks of its Christian origin and witnesses to the death of a properly religious culture. For when the sacred and the secular are divided, then religion becomes one more department of human life, one activity among others. This has in fact happened to bourgeois religion.... Only a religion which is a way of living in every sphere either deserves to or can hope to survive. For the task of religion is to help see the secular as the sacred, the world as under God. When the sacred and the secular are

> separated, then ritual becomes an end not to the hallowing of the world, but in itself. Likewise if our religion is fundamentally irrelevant to our politics, then we are recognising the political as a realm outside the reign of God. To divide the sacred from the secular is to recognise God's action only within the narrowest limits. A religion which recognises such a division, as does our own, is one on the point of dying,

I am not sure that David and Alasdair would have been so totally opposed as might seem to the case. Both recognised the centrality of the sacred, and the openness of humanity to God. David's line was deliberately provocative and theologically confusing. He stressed the transcendence and omnipresence of God as strongly as he stressed the limited and provisional role of the Church and of religion. It was precisely David's understanding of the importance and value of secular structures which made him wary of churches, as churches, dabbling in matters which were beyond their competence, trying to have a view on everything.

This led him into a concern about some of the reports which came from the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility (BSR), a body with which he maintained a friendly but critical relationship. Perhaps the report which annoyed him most was David Edwards's pamphlet *The State of the Nation* (1976), and some reference to this helps to illuminate his thinking. His critique of this and other pamphlets is that they start from the assumption that the political and economic system is 'all right', and that the Church's social role is to recommend various pragmatic, corrective measures. (Sara Maitland made the same point later when she refused to assent to the report of a BSR working party of which she had been a member.) I believe that he was not opposed to political pragmatism, but he was certainly opposed to any view which saw this as the central task of Christian social witness. At the conclusion of his review of Edwards's pamphlet, he quoted the Haitian proverb: *Pwaso gewe kofias na dlo e se dlo ki kuit li* –The fish trusts the water, and in the water it is cooked! Churches which become too closely allied with state or cultural ideologies are, literally, in dangerous waters.

Incidentally, going through David's papers, I realised that David Edwards was extremely angry at his critique, and wrote to him on Shrove Tuesday 1976:

> The other day I asked an Oxford theologian what kind of man you are, and he replied, 'Oh, don't worry about him, he's one of the rudest men in Oxford'.

David was also highly critical of the stream of thinking, prominent within Anglicanism since the publication of *Lux Mundi,* as well as in the 'social gospel' movement in the USA, which spoke of 'sanctifying the social order'. He held that the breaking down of the division between sacred and secular had totalitarian implications. His criticism of much Christian social thought was that it simply endorsed and 'baptised' secular ideas. Just before his death, he criticised the Church of England's adoption of proportional representation, an idea based on a doctrine of representation which was itself highly suspect. His paper *Visions at Regular Intervals*,.published under the name of William Paley, was a strong attack on the shift in the Church towards centralised government. Like Figgis, he saw the dangers of statism as much in the Church as in secular society.

David was a strong believer in the liberating power of the gospel, and he stood firmly within the tradition which saw salvation in terms of total liberation. His position is summed up in the title of an essay in *Essays Catholic and Radical* (edited by Rowan Williams and myself in 1983): ‘Stepping Out of Babylon’, a title and theme to which I shall return.

David felt that much Christian social thought was based on creation without the fall, incarnation without the cross, what he once called ‘neat incarnationalism’. Here he saw an inadequate theology of redemption. Much of his theological thinking was around the question of the nature of salvation. This comes out clearly in his essay ‘’’Stepping out of Babylon’’: sin, salvation and social transformation in Christian tradition.’ in *Essays Catholic and Radical (1983).* Here he looks at four views of the nature of salvation which he terms here and now, now but not here, not here and not yet, and here but not yet. Each of these views has an individual and a social version. David claimed that there was truth in each of them but that it was the fourth -here but not yet- which must govern the rest. For the movement into the future, the cultivation of discontent with how things are, the refusal ever to give up the struggle -these were central themes in David’s thinking. Against those who argued that the world must set the agenda for the church, I think he would have said that it was the world to come which must set the agenda.

His understanding of salvation and of the tensions involved in the dialectic of present and future had its effect on his approach to the politics of the Church. As a disciple of Figgis, the subject of his doctoral work, he believed in ‘a free church in a free state’ and was opposed to the establishment of the Church of England. He saw too the danger that churches merely reflected dominant cultural values, interests and assumptions, often assuming that they were witnessing to gospel positions. Liberation meant a process of disentanglement in which the captivity of gospel to culture was ended. In a little known critique of the Lichfield Report, *Marriage and the Church’s Task*, he examined this in relation to the doctrine of marriage. His critique, written in 1978, is particularly relevant as the Church of England produces yet another report on the same subject. Referring to what the authors call a ‘high doctrine of marriage’ David suggested

> that this ‘high’ doctrine of marriage is derived not from the New Testament nor from Christian tradition, but rather reflects contemporary secular rhetoric.

Rather he argued that

> Marriage, like the state, is to be seen as a ‘remedy against sin’ as well as an institution which has positive and redemptive aspects....The commission’s understanding of the family derives less from the gospel of Christ than from the gospel of North Oxford and the Dragon School.

The commission spoke of marriage as ‘a foretaste of God’s kingdom’, yet David recalled that, according to Jesus, in the Kingdom of God they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Mark 12:25). The commission’s claim that in marriage the partners ‘give everything and ...receive everything’ was, he argued, rhetorical nonsense.

> It is a monstrous misrepresentation of the commitment in marriage as ‘unconditional;’ or as ‘total and unreserved’ (pp 126-7); such a commitment

> can be made only to God and to his kingdom. The guest who had 'married a wife and therefore cannot come' did not taste of the heavenly banquet ' (Lk 14:20).

His concern with the cultural captivity of the church made him at some points sympathetic to the thinking of Edward Norman as expressed in his Reith Lectures *Christianity and the World Order* (1978). Central to Norman's critique was the concept of 'politicisation'. However, there were two crucial differences which made David's critique of Norman particularly devastating. First, Norman saw what he called the 'politicisation' of the church as a phenomenon of recent origin, associated with radicals, specifically with the World Council of Churches, liberation theologians, and those whom he termed 'liberals'. David argued that those who were at the heart of the political system had been the main proponents of politicisation since the time of the Emperor Constantine.

Secondly, Norman, unlike David, seemed to ignore the crucial distinction between the *context* and the *content* of ideas.

> Norman appears to believe that, while we may be able to give an account of how people have come to hold the preferences they do, we can say nothing about the question of their validity. The causal explanation which emerges in the course of the lectures is a rather crude form of social determinism which one would be tempted to call 'Marxist' if this were not to speak ill of the dead.

David was very worried that the church had swallowed uncritically the growing power and scope of the coercive state, and what he saw as a tragically mistaken policy of getting the state to do things we should be doing for ourselves. His socialism, socialism with a strong anarchist dimension, was definitely of the non-statist variety, socialism from below.

How then did David see the role of the Church in relation to the social order? Certainly he was a 'high churchman', but he would have agreed with John Rpbinson's view that it was important to have a higher doctrine of the Kingdom of God than of the Church. .

He was highly critical of the theme of the 'servant church' and of the Church as an influence on society. This also comes out in the response to Edwards.

> He sees the Church's task as that of 'serving society' ....But whatever they mean by society, the Church does not exist to serve it, but to challenge the very basis on which its life is built...The world -understood as the universe organised apart from God- is not something to be influenced or served but to be rejected or opposed or cast down.

There was a strong emphasis throughout his writing on the character of the Christian community as a community of exiles, strangers and pilgrims.

His approach to conflict is expressed in his position statement for election to the General Synod in the mid-1980s, a statement almost guaranteed to ensure that he would fail to get elected. He began by stating 'that the Church....is not some kind of

social service agency' and then moved on to the issue of conflict. He cited a diocesan bishop who claimed that 'to admit acrimony into theological discussion is more fundamentally heretical than any erroneous opinions upheld or condemned in the course of discussion.' Needless to say, an utterance of such obvious stupidity incurred the wrath of David Nicholls. He went on to point out that the role of Christians in politics was not to conciliate but to witness to justice and truth.

He was wary of too glib a use of the theme of reconciliation. Thus he said in *God and Government* (1995):

> It is sometimes said that the Christian gospel can be summarised in one word: 'reconciliation'. Perhaps in one sense it can, but the only people reconciled as a result of Jesus' teaching seem to have been Pilate and Herod (p 217).

It is impossible to make sense of David's theology and politics unless we realise that all his thinking was rooted in a profound sense that human beings were open to the activity of the God who is beyond conceptual definition and beyond our culture-bound images. This belief that human beings are open to God, rooted and grounded in God, comes out in his one entry to the enormous *Dictionary of Theology, Ethics and Society* where he spoke of a graceful life as one which avoids the arrogance of self-sufficiency and accepts that human beings are dependent on one another and on the grace of God. It comes out too in the closing lines of *Deity and Domination* where he referred to Robert Streater's 17th Century painting in the Sheldonian Theatre in which theology implores the assistance of truth. It comes out in his passionate belief that salvation, liberation, involves a movement out of bondage and oppression into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

In the early 1980s he was working on a chapter about the meaning of salvation when he heard Marcia Griffith's song 'Steppin' Out of Babylon' which was top of the charts in Jamaica at the time. Very excited, he burst into the kitchen in Bethnal Green, and said 'I've got the title for my chapter'. So I end with Marcia Griffiths. It is the story of David's life: the movement towards liberation which he saw as the goal of all human life and longing.

[The lecture ended with the playing of Marcia Griffith's song. If any more cybertechno-person than I knows how to play it on this site, I will be happy to send the tape! KL]