

A Protestant View of the Common Good

Introduction

The 'common good' is tantalizingly elusive. The concept is also a contested one, the 'common' is perhaps not so common after all. Contested, that is, within the tradition of Catholic Social Thought, a rich mine of theological wisdom and insight, but one which also reveals the complexity of the idea. The rooting of the common good within Catholic Social Thought raises the question of whether the concept is restrictively located within the Roman Catholicism rather than being of broader application. Certainly, from an ecumenical perspective, Catholic Social Thought can be both attractive and impenetrable at the same time. The presence of a body of social doctrine within the Roman Catholic Church, however contested, is not, and indeed in many traditions, cannot be replicated. However, that is not to say that the Protestant traditions contain no doctrine or even that they lack bodies of systematic theological thought; they contain both. The difference lies in the authority which is attached to each. Equally, the way in which common good ideas within Catholic Social Thought have been grounded in concepts of Christian theology such as the nature and dignity of the human person cannot simply be dismissed as narrowly Catholic, more of a gift of Catholicism to the whole of Christianity.

The question is whether Catholic and Protestant traditions can be brought into a more effective dialogue around the common good. That requires awareness not only of the nature of the concept itself, but also about the language of the common good. Perhaps the inscrutable nature of Catholic Social Thought has led to some superficiality in the adoption of the concept both not only in secular thinking but also by Protestants. Yet, Protestantism too, despite the lack of a magisterium, does provide a range of systematic resources to explore this topic. However, the task must be done. The outcome could be an even richer understanding which might even, as James Hanvey has argued, provide 'avenues for reconceptualising the relationship between the domains of the 'sacred' and the 'secular.'

Hanvey's observation reminds us of the potential for the common good to bring about new and deeper reflections upon business and the economy. At its heart the common good is neither the adoption nor the rejection of a market economy. In reality, the common good is a living tradition. If the common good is at all about human flourishing then the economy has a central role to play. Markets and competition both contribute to the common good and yet the idea cannot be reduced to either individual rationality or purely contractual relationships. How precisely does the common good relate to the nature and role of government, the nature of the civil economy of intermediate institutions, property rights and the rule of law? In this endeavour Catholicism and Protestantism

can be effective dialogue partners. The common good is not simply an aspiration, in either Catholic or Protestant thought.

The common good in ecumenical dialogue

There is remarkably little by way of substantive contributions to debates around the common good within either formal or informal ecumenical dialogue. However, that is not the same as asserting that Protestant traditions are failing to engage or that there are no initiatives. In *Anglican Social Theology*, although most contributors to the volume tend to assert rather than analyse the common good, Anna Rowlands, in her chapter seeks to explore something of the theological communality. She makes three important points about Anglican and Catholic Social Teaching. First, she argues that both traditions lay doctrinal weight on the inalienable nature of human dignity, alongside the social nature of humanity, freedom and rights. Second, the gospel carries a distinctive social and political character. Third, prominence is given to the role of intermediate institutions.¹ These reflections are important in thinking more widely about Protestant contributions. The grounding of common good thinking in human dignity is an argument concerning the nature of God and the *imago dei* in humanity. This idea is firmly established in the biblical narrative as well as the theological tradition. It involves an appeal to creation which links the idea to the creation narratives and also to evangelical Protestant political thought. Hence, the foundational dignity of the human person is a building block of the common good across traditions not simply within Catholicism. Similarly, Anna Rowlands third point on the importance of the intermediate institutions. Voluntary societies, the family – the institutions of the civil economy – are the historical bedrocks of Protestant evangelical approaches to society and the common good. The more contested area would be Anna Rowland's second category of the social and political nature of the gospel. If this means that the common good is *both* individual and corporate then this also builds upon the Protestant approach to the Christian faith. Clearly both in Geneva with Calvin, in the evangelical social and political action of nineteenth-century Britain and in the Kuyperean understanding of Christian democracy the common good was expressed in both individual flourishing and corporate, societal good. However, the potential, and lazy, link of common good thinking with a socialistic or corporatist approach to political life and society will also encounter some resistance.

Catholic and a wide range of Protestant and other non-Catholic writers came together in 2015 to produce *Together for the Common Good*. This volume covered a wider range of contributors than *Anglican Social Theology* and was brought together largely by Jenny Sinclair, the daughter of Bishop

¹ Anna Rowlands, 'Fraternal Traditions: Anglican Social Theology and Catholic Social Teaching in a British Context,' in Malcolm Brown (ed), *Anglican Social Theology*, Church House Publishing, London 2014, p141

David Sheppard, and in celebration of the ecumenical social work of Bishop Sheppard, an Anglican, and Archbishop Derek Worlock in the city of Liverpool in the 1980s. There was some engagement with issues of wealth and the economy. Yet the diversity, whilst on the one hand reflecting the complexity of the subject under discussion, on the other revealed a lack of common understanding about the common good.

How then can all of this help us in exploring a Protestant view of the common good? First, we need to recognise that we are yet only in the foothills. There are clear theological commonalities but a dearth of in-depth reflection. Partly this is a matter of language, to which we will shortly turn; the way in which common good language and thought has been embedded in Catholic teaching both exposes the lack of depth elsewhere, yet also, paradoxically, establishes a divide in meaning and understanding. Second, there are Protestant and evangelical approaches to the common good that do bear fruit in such a dialogue. The role and nature of the state and civil society, then flourishing of both individuals and societies, and the central place of the intermediate institutions are all central to this. Liberal Protestantism in particular has lost sight of the balance of the state and the voluntary. Third, then, in understanding Protestant approaches to the common good it is essential to recognise that there is not 'the' Protestant understanding, rather a range of views and opinions. This paper then simply seeks to offer then building blocks towards 'a Protestant view of the common good.'

Language and meaning in the common good

'It is the indisputable teaching of St Paul that either with hand or brain every man ought to work for the public good.'²

These words were spoken by the rather radical evangelical Methodist, Hugh Price Hughes (1847-1902) in a series of sermons published in 1890 as *Social Christianity*. This was in the immediate aftermath of the London Dock Strike of 1889 in which one Baptist minister, J.C. Carlile, not only addressed mass meetings of the South London dockers, but also sat on the strike committee³ and Cardinal Manning was closely involved as a mediator. Two years after the strike Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, 'On the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour.' In this seminal work Pope Leo noted that 'all citizens, without exception, can and ought to contribute to that common good in which individuals share so advantageously to themselves.'⁴ Pope Leo added not only a framework of property rights and the priority of the family, but also rejected socialism and indeed any superficial attraction of equality per se. He argued that there 'naturally exist among mankind manifold

² Hugh Price Hughes, *Social Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1890, p263

³ D.W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, George, Allen & Unwin, London, 1982, p54

⁴ *Rerum Novarum*, para 34

differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition. Such inequality is far from being disadvantageous either to individuals or to the community.⁵

So, the complexity of the problem is exposed. Is Hugh Price Hughes' 'public good' the same as Pope Leo's 'common good'? How does this concept relate to the socio-economic structure of society? Is there a history to the development of ideas of common good in the Protestant tradition which we can usefully compare to the ideas within Catholicism?

We should allow the Catholic Social tradition to establish some basic meanings and definitions. Even if these matters are contested it provides a basic framework for comparison.

Perhaps the most usual definition of the common good is that contained in the 1965 Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*:

...the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.⁶

This, of course, both builds upon a prior tradition and prepares the way for further development. In 1996, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales issued a document entitled, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church*, which certainly establishes some powerful motifs in Catholic thought, and places the dignity of the human person at the heart of the theology. The Common Good in this document is defined as 'the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life.'⁷ The connection to *Gaudium et Spes* is obvious.

This then leads to the idea of solidarity, an important element of common good language. So, *Gaudium et Spes* resists 'a merely individualistic morality,' while the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1986 document under Pope John Paul II, *Libertatis Conscientia*, refers to the solidarity which obliges a person to 'contribute...to the common good of society at all levels,'⁸ and emphasises both international solidarity as a moral obligation (para 91) and solidarity with the poor (paras 89-90). Pope John Paul II's 1987 Encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* emphasises solidarity in terms of 'recognising one another as persons,'⁹ and those with more recognising their responsibility to the weaker, which thus demands the rejection of the exploitation and oppression of others. The

⁵ Rerum Novarum, para 17

⁶ Gaudium et Spes, para 26

⁷ *The Common Good and the Catholic Church*, paragraph 48

⁸ Libertatis Conscientia, para 73

⁹ Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, para 39

theological basis of solidarity is the dignity of the human person, the common fatherhood of God and identity as children of Christ. *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI's Encyclical, refers similarly to the fulfilment of both the individual and all. So, one key area of debate, will always be the relationship of the flourishing of the individual to the corporate. This is well illustrated by *Caritas in Veritate*, an Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI in 2009:

Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely delegated to the State.¹⁰

This also illustrates the complexity of the role of government. Although, 'the common good is the reason that the political authority exists,' its role is limited.

The other aspect commonly linked to the common good is the idea of subsidiarity. This principle, much misunderstood, deals with the relationship of family, social organisation and political society. There are clear instances when intervention requires a higher authority to ensure the flourishing of all, but such intervention should be temporary – another important point about both the role and the limits of government.¹¹ So *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pope Pius XI, 1931), in arguing for the role of subordinate associations, maintains that 'the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them.' *Mater et Magistra* (Pope John XXIII, 1961) builds on this with its statement that 'it is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, for a larger and higher association to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower societies.'¹² Pope John XXIII adds that the 'State and other agencies of public law must not extend their ownership beyond what is clearly required by considerations of the common good properly understood, and even then there must be safeguards.'¹³ *Libertatis Conscientia* notes that the state should not 'ever take the place of the initiative and the responsibility of individuals and intermediate communities at the level where they can act.'¹⁴ Indeed, *Mater et Magistra* argues that the state must actively assist private enterprise in economic development.

In summary then there are three key elements to common good teaching. Firstly, the foundational theological principle of the dignity of the human person created in the image of God, secondly, the notion of solidarity and thirdly, the principle of subsidiarity and the intermediate institutions. The Papal Encyclicals are careful to reject the endorsement of any particular economic system. In

¹⁰ *Caritas in Veritate*, para 38

¹¹ Rodger Charles, *Christian Social Witness and Teaching, volume 2*, Gracewing, Leominster, 1998, p402

¹² *Mater et Magistra*, para 53

¹³ *Mater et Magistra*, para 117

¹⁴ *Libertatis Conscientia*, para 73

paragraph 73, *Libertatis Conscientia* rejects both individualism (whether social or political) and collectivism. Perhaps then the position can best be summarised by Pope John Paul II, in 1991, in *Centesimus Annus* responding to the question of the priority of the capitalist market system:

If by “capitalism” is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a “business economy”, “market economy” or simply “free economy.” But if by “capitalism” is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.¹⁵

In the light of this we should perhaps not be surprised by continued debate around the common good *within* the Roman Catholic tradition.

The main evangelical contributor to the *‘Together for the Common Good,’* volume, Jonathan Chaplin, defined common good as ‘all aspects of the public welfare of British society,’ linking the wider Christian revival of concern for the common good to a reaction to government austerity.¹⁶ Although he refers to ‘the central concerns of a social vision of what makes for a flourishing human social order according to God’s design,’¹⁷ this is an inadequate response which really fails to grasp the depth of the Catholic exploration. It is also difficult to see what is distinctively Protestant or Evangelical. Common good and public good are rich and inclusive concepts, possible more so than simply ‘public welfare’.

The notion of the ‘public good’ is taken up again in 2010 in *Good News for the Public Square*, an edited volume of lectures from evangelical contributors sponsored in the United Kingdom by the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship. We see here the beginning of a Protestant evangelical approach. The principles set out by the contributors (Mike Ovey, Wayne Grudem, Jonathan Chaplin, David McIlroy and Timothy Laurence) might be summarised as:

- Both the positive and negative roles of government within limits
- The continuing place of creation principles

¹⁵ *Centesimus Annus*, paragraph 42

¹⁶ Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Evangelicalism and the Language(s) of the Common Good,’ in Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail, *Together for the Common Good*, SCM, 2015, p91

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p105

- The rights of private property

We can see here both the opportunity and the problem. On the one hand there are clear links to Catholic Social Teaching in terms of both theology and practice, yet the language used is very different. Partially this is due to the lack of depth of the analysis and consequential lack of proper engagement with the existing Catholic tradition. However, it is partially also due to a degree of alienation from the language of the Church rather than the Bible and a rather obsessive preoccupation with Papal Encyclicals often only of real interest to those *within* the tradition.

The use of the expression 'public good' in some of the Protestant writing is less helpful than a proper exposition of the common good. The use of 'public' too easily falls into a more collectivist presumption about the role of the state and is less easily aligned to the idea of both individual and collective flourishing.

Nevertheless, there are some powerfully helpful themes emerging for our quest. First, theologically, alongside the *image dei* and the dignity of the human person which can be linked to the Protestant theme of creation principles, we can also lay the idea of covenant. This theme, prominent in Protestantism, is, of course, referred to in the Encyclicals. To give just one relevant and pertinent example, *Libertatis Conscientia* in paragraphs 45 and 46, specifically links creation law and covenant. The development of these themes might be fruitful. Second, practically, the whole idea of intermediate institutions is a response to poverty and need which has appealed to both Catholic and Protestant. Catholicism, of course, has a long history of the discharge of social responsibility through the institutions of the church, monasteries, schools, charitable institutions and so on. The Protestant reformers may have dissolved the Catholic institutions but they too understood the need for proper provision for the poor, vulnerable or victim of historic circumstance. In a sense this is why, at least the second-generation reformers, were forced to address questions of civil government. Both Luther and Calvin sought to make some institutional provision for welfare, in Luther's case through the 'community chest,' and in Calvin's case through the office of deacon as well as, in the case of Geneva, a social fund and the city hospital. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century we see Thomas Chalmers developing the voluntary principle in action in Glasgow, alongside a market economy, and then, with the Earl of Shaftesbury, a role for the state, not in place of, but alongside, the voluntary principle. To some degree at least both views were challenged by the 'nonconformist conscience' of which Hughes was an example.

There seems to have been generally less exploration or serious work undertaken to establish the building blocks of 'a Protestant view,' of the common good and that is my objective, at least to

contribute to such a process. We cannot deal with every aspect, but how are we to make sense of these complexities?

Calvin and the Common Good

The spread of the Protestant Reformation in Europe meant the loss of the traditional institutions of welfare from hospitals to schools, staffed primarily by priest, nuns and confraternities. These had to be replaced by a new Protestant infrastructure of social welfare. Need did not disappear with the Reformation. Luther and the early development of the 'community chest' will need to be left for another occasion. Calvin, however, as a second-generation Reformer, faced this question as he sought to provide the structure of a mature Reformed church in Geneva. Indeed, the city authorities had to face the social welfare question even before Calvin arrived by centralising and consolidating the small hospitals of the city into one large general institution.¹⁸ The language of the common good may not have been current, but the issues generated by the concept were as acute in the sixteenth century as in the twenty first.

In order to understand Calvin's view of 'common good,' we need to establish two principles; first, his view of natural order and secondly, his understanding of civic government and society. In doing so we see that Calvin draw on his understanding of the very nature of God, his supremacy and majesty, his providence and design. As sources we have not only his *Institutes*, but also his letters, commentaries and ordinances.

Although there is an extensive scholarly debate over the extent to which Calvin allowed for a natural theology,¹⁹ Calvin's influence on later developments means it is crucial to consider his theology. Calvin was clear that God had planted clear marks in the universe. Hence no-one can plead ignorance. God, 'daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.'²⁰ Calvin used both astronomy and the human body as evidence of God's glory manifest in both the order and variety of the universe. However, Calvin did not stop there. For him, sin and the fall, disguised the wonderful ordering of God from the eye. Hence man can now only discern God as redeemer.

Calvin dealt with this tension in the ordering of the world and the spiritual priorities of redemption by drawing a distinction between the spiritual realm and the civil realm. However, although separate, they are not adversaries. Calvin does not fall into the trap of later Pietistic evangelicalism

¹⁸ Jeannine E. Olson, 'Calvin and social-ethical issues' in D.K. McKim, *John Calvin*, CUP, Cambridge, 2004, p154

¹⁹ See, for example, the exchange between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth in E. Brunner, *Nature and Grace* and K. Barth, *No!*, contained in P. Fraenkel (trans), *Natural Theology*, London 1946

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1

of ignoring the social order of the world because our true home is in the spiritual realm – a problem that has somewhat beset the evangelical tradition. Rather, for Calvin, God, in his providence, created order so as not to leave the human race ‘in a state of confusion that they might live after the manner of beasts.’²¹ Calvin thus recognises that we are not simply individuals but are part of a wider society and that society needs social rules or laws. Thus,

Since man is by nature a social animal, he is disposed, from natural instinct, to cherish and preserve society; and accordingly we see that the minds of all men have impressions of civil order and honesty. Hence it is that every individual understands how human societies must be regulated by laws, and also is able to comprehend the principles of those laws.²²

Hence, Calvin understands our essential social nature, that society is not just to be preserved (a negative reason for civil government) but also to be cherished (a positive reason). This same double purpose is seen in his commentary on Romans where the purpose of civil government is seen as the ‘tranquillity of the good and to restrain the waywardness of the wicked.’²³ Although tranquillity may seem rather passive we again here see not simply the negative view of government – restraining evil-doers and wickedness – but that there is a positive reason in the protection of the good. Well, if tranquillity seems passive, then cherish is certainly more active and dynamic and may prove to be a very fruitful word for us. Luther viewed civil government *only* as a necessary evil; the radical reformers, of course, viewed government as an unnecessary evil; Calvin had a much more positive evaluation.

Calvin set out his main exposition and understanding of and rationale for civil government in Chapter 20 of Book IV of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This is the last chapter of his magisterial work and his most explicit statement on role of civil government. We should not, however, make the mistake as thinking that this means it was an after-thought. To the contrary, Calvin, is recognising that he cannot leave his great work without addressing the nature and role of governmental order for human society.

For Calvin, civil government is a divinely-established order – ‘the order established by God,’²⁴ or as he put it in his commentary on Romans 12:1, ‘constituted by God’s ordinance.’ This is entirely in line with his understanding of nature and order we have already considered. Part of Calvin’s reasoning is to oppose an excessive Christian libertarianism (the Anabaptists) which saw the

²¹ Calvin, Commentary on 1 Pe 2:13, quoted in McKim, *Calvin*, p174

²² Calvin, *Institutes* II.12.13

²³ Calvin, Commentary on Romans 13:3, quoted in McKim, *Calvin*, p174

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* IV.20.1

Christian free from the constraints of king and magistrate and subject only to Christ. For Calvin this is category confusion. The magistracy, civil government, he argues, is appointed by God as ‘the legitimate and just government of the world,’ and ‘is ordained by God for the well-being of mankind.’²⁵ The provision of civil government, argues Stevenson, is that for Calvin it demonstrates ‘the reality of God’s providential care.’²⁶ It is in effect an expression of common grace. Indeed, one might even suggest that common grace is a Protestant building block for common good.

Calvin, at least to the modern eye, struggles with the tension between the role of government in maintaining true faith, doctrine and worship, and the wider civil role of maintain peace, doing good and restraining evil. The former is complex and set aside here for our purposes. Alongside those ‘doctrinal’ purposes, Calvin argues that the role of civil government is also:

to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquillity.²⁷

This clearly reinforces a positive role for government – provided by God as a help or an aid to achieve our stated objectives. We are to cherish not just the absence of conflict between individuals, but our ‘common peace and tranquillity.’ Calvin includes the maintenance of civil defence, military action, capital punishment and so on, but as we will see, his view is not restricted to these matters – or, to put it another way, Calvin has concern for the common good. Civil government is needed no less than the essentials of life – bread, water, light and air.²⁸ However, an aid or help it remains; government cannot produce utopia or even effectively reshape or remould the world; it’s role is limited. In addition to all of this we are to ‘adapt’ or shape or adjust our conduct to civil society and to conciliation. All of these things are potential elements of ‘common good.’ Indeed one might suggest they describe social justice. Calvin adds that if these things are taken away then we rob mankind of his humanity. So, we also see there, the dignity of the human person. And all of this is overlaid with a demand for justice, expounded in his sermon on Job and elsewhere.

In respect of the positive reasons for government Calvin, after setting out a series of requirements to do with worship, doctrine and blasphemy, adduces four roles for government, after affirming the necessities of life:

- Maintenance of public order

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 13:1

²⁶ William R. Stevenson, ‘Calvin and Political Issues,’ in McKim, *Calvin*, p174

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* IV.20.2

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.3

- Protection of private property
- The encouragement of commerce
- Honesty and modesty

In his commentary on Romans 12:8 (the gift of ruling), Calvin makes clear that he views this gift as applying to civil government and not just the Church, the role of those in governmental authority being to 'provide for the safety of all' and to 'watch day and night for the wellbeing of the whole community.'²⁹ Indeed Calvin in his Old Testament commentaries notes the link of 'right government' with 'strangers, orphans and widows,' a reminder of the responsibility of civil government to care for the most vulnerable.³⁰ The civil magistrate who is conscience of his appointment by and dependence upon God will exhibit 'guardianship, goodness, benevolence, and justice.'³¹ Their role is to provide for the 'common peace and safety,' though Calvin says this only after referring to Jer 22:3 and Ps 82:3-4 regarding the protection of the poor and innocent. The role of government was to 'give aid and protection to the oppressed,' as well as protecting then good against evil and curbing the criminal. This requires strict discipline and punishment.³²

The levying of tax was a legitimate duty of government and although it was permissible for revenue to be used to maintain their dignity of office, those in office 'must remember, in their turn, that their revenues are not so much private chests as treasuries of the whole people.'³³ Taxes are 'subsidies of the public necessity' and should not be burdensome upon the poor.³⁴ The role of magistrate is not a necessary evil but rather for the public good.³⁵

What happened in practice? Well, for Calvin, the ancient office of deacon was to be rescued (as he saw it) from the liturgical functions imposed upon it in order to be an agent of social transformation, overseeing the provision of social welfare within and without the church. This was the voluntary principle in action. Work itself was endowed with moral purpose and dignity, the fruits of creation were to be enjoyed (Calvin had a cellar of fine wine), there was to be no begging *and* laws were passed to ensure that social solidarity was achieved through the central management of funds for social welfare through the 'hospital' and the provision of public education. A rather rich mosaic. And, for the good of the whole community (shall we say, the 'common good') money would now be lent at interest in particular for the purposes of investment

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 12:8

³⁰ McKim, *Calvin*, p176

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.6

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.9

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.13

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.22

and social purposes (rather than excess consumption) with rates ranging from 5% to 6.67% between 1541 and 1557, though with Calvin pressing for rates to be kept low. Usury, traditionally lending at interest, was now defined as lending at exorbitant rates. So, the market was also to play its role in the common good, even if there were some pressures and tensions (for example, over interest rates).

Calvin clearly established elements of the common good, with an active subsidiarity in the voluntary principle but also solidarity in the management of civic welfare within the overall framework of the dignity of work and its fruits. There are clear positive, albeit limited roles for civil government and a proper place for commerce and the market. The dignity of the human person shines through, as does the continuing moral law and the concept of common grace. In some ways reflecting on Calvin and the common good reinforces the contemporary complexity of language locked in the Catholic tradition being inaccessible to many in the Protestant tradition. Our investigation so far, however, shows that when deconstructed there are both common concerns and common themes across the traditions. Calvin's view of the 'common good,' of government, of social justice, rather belies the Weber thesis on the origins of capitalism; though that may have been the fault of Calvinism rather than Calvin himself, or perhaps the Weber thesis, whilst containing kernels of truth, is rather misplaced.

Evangelicals and the common good

Let us now turn to later evangelical thinkers. How later evangelicals viewed any concept of 'common good' depended in part, but only in part, on their relationship to economics of Adam Smith. The publication in 1776 of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* marked the origin of the modern investigation of the science of economics. The work has been described as 'the fountainhead of classical economics.'³⁶ Smith not only defined the essential concepts of a market economic model - value, price, cost and exchange – but also advocated a minimalist approach to government intervention in the workings of the market.³⁷ The 'Wealth of Nations', reflecting Smith's deism, saw a harmonious order in nature which, through the mechanisms of economic equilibrium functioned for the common good. Smith's basic aim was to produce a model for economic growth. The idea of the division of labour, leading to greater productivity, was at the heart of his approach.³⁸ Smith, though, went further. He also divided labour into two further categories. Productive labour was deployed in the production and manufacture of

³⁶ B.A. Corry, *Money, Saving and Investment in English Economics 1800-1850*, London, 1962, page 1

³⁷ E.L. Paul, *Moral Revolution and Economic Science*, Westport, Connecticut, 1979, page 5

³⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 3rd edition, London, 1812, page 19

goods. Unproductive labour included not only the clergy (for which there was, regrettably, more than ample evidence) but also, more significantly, the government.

However, to appreciate Smith we need more than the 'Wealth of Nations.' In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith saw humanity as composed of three sets of motives, self-love and sympathy, freedom and propriety and labour and exchange. All of these elements can be seen as contributing to the common good. The effect of the economic mechanism, according to Smith, is to bring about, not only the satisfaction of others, but indeed the welfare of all, by each serving their own interests. In this way, so it was argued, a greater public good is achieved. In addition, principles of natural compassion are implanted in man, 'which interest him in the welfare of others and make their happiness necessary to him.'³⁹ So, whatever else we may think, we should be careful not to caricature Adam Smith. The observer can see both continuity and discontinuity with Calvin – reflecting their world views.

The paradox in the classical model between the pursuit of self-interest on the part of individuals and the overall achievement of the public good could only be explained by the providential design of those laws of economics which brought this about. This 'natural theology' links Protestants and evangelicals with the market economy. Natural theology refers to those natural laws or provisions in creation which determine the workings of the created world. Amongst Protestant evangelicals there has been more dependency on this approach than is sometimes acknowledged, although, of course, evangelicals have always been particularly concerned about the disruption to the model caused by sin, to which we will return.

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) is the evangelical through whom Smithian economics most obviously travelled and in whom we can see some distinctive elements of common good.⁴⁰ There is here, as with Smith himself, both continuity and discontinuity with Calvin. For Chalmers, the paradox in the classical model between the pursuit of self-interest on the part of individuals and the overall achievement of the public good could only be explained by the providential design of those laws of economics which brought this about.

In the second volume of his *Natural Theology*, Chalmers considered in detail how the natural order affected both the economic and political well-being of society. There was, he asserted, a natural law of property. In addition to that he appealed to the law of self-preservation (that is, individuals acting in their own interests), which led to both industry and what he termed, the law of relative affection. In other words we are back to the paradox of self-interest leading to the common good.

³⁹ Paul, *Moral Revolution*, page 11

⁴⁰ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p88

The law of relative affection followed Smith's theory of moral sentiments in maintaining that a natural seed was implanted in humanity that gave the individual compassion for the distress and destitution of others. So, Chalmers argued that 'the philosophy of free trade is grounded on the principle, that society is most enriched or best served, when commerce is left to its own spontaneous evolutions,' and that the 'greatest economic good – or, in other words, a more prosperous result is obtained by the spontaneous play and busy competition of a thousand wills, each bent on the prosecution of its own selfishness,' it is, he said, 'when each man is left to seek with concentrated and exclusive aim, his own individual benefit – it is then, that markets are best supplied.'⁴¹

So, the 'invisible hand,' in the view of Chalmers, was clearly that of the Almighty Himself. As Chalmers said, this 'strongly bespeaks a higher agent, by whose transcendental wisdom it is that all is made to conspire so harmoniously and to terminate so beneficially.'⁴² So, Chalmers invests Smith's model with divinity; both as origin (first cause) and consequence (cannot be gainsaid).

However, two particular problems arose from the classical model and its adoption by evangelicals; namely, the impact of sin and the possibility of inequality. In economic terms this led to disequilibrium; in Christian terms to poverty and suffering. How in this instance then was the common good to be preserved? The classic evangelical view saw life on earth as a probation or test for the life to come. Hence the market functioned as a field in which to exercise, a school of discipleship, to bring values into the functioning of the market. Only by participating in the market can the redeemed individual bring values and behaviours to bear in a transformative way; ultimately this is how to deal with poverty and suffering.

The answer for Chalmers, through the law of relative affection (or Smith's moral sentiments) lay in the voluntary principle, which involved both the rejection of state intervention and the development of voluntary organisations, which in turn provided an appropriate setting for the exercise of philanthropy, building upon the Scriptural principles of enterprise, work and cheerful giving.

For Chalmers government intervention was not only unnecessary but also arrogant as it sought to usurp the Creator from his rightful position. In addition, any extensive role for the state had the effect of taking over those things which truly belonged in the heart – the moral sentiments. Chalmers argued that, 'we cannot translate beneficence into the statute-book of law, without

⁴¹ Chalmers, *Natural Theology*, volume 2.4.4.6, in *Works*, volume 2, pages 136-137

⁴² *Ibid.*, page 137

expunging it from the statute-book of the heart.⁴³ Edward Copleston, articulating the voluntary principle in his own words, suggested that ‘an action to be virtuous must be voluntary.’⁴⁴ Compulsion, said Chalmers, would lead to the ‘extinction of goodwill in the hearts of the affluent and of gratitude in the hearts of the poor.’⁴⁵ Of course, that latter viewpoint reflects the paternalism of the age. The intervention of the state had led to duties being replaced by rights, to dependency rather than freedom. Chalmers’ appeal to property, industry and compassion for others was the beginning of an evangelical economic ethic, an evangelical common good seeking the flourishing of both individuals and society.

Chalmers, partially due to his opposition to compulsory welfare relief for the poor (‘the Poor Laws’) was a pioneer of urban mission activity through his social experiments in his Glasgow parish of St John’s in the period 1819-1823. Chalmers denounced all forms of ‘legalized charity’ (i.e. government instituted) in articles in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1817 and 1818. He set out to show that even the poorest of communities could achieve self-help without government compulsion. He advocated the linking of rural and industrial parishes and teams of clerical and lay workers in each area. Crucially the foundation of such care lay in the family and the home. This, combined with a degree of self-restraint, ensured that voluntary care and relief was provided; there was no need for the state to intervene. He set out his views in his *Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns (1821)*.

Chalmers became the minister of St John’s parish in September 1819. There were some 2,000 families, many of whom had no connection with the Christian church. Chalmers was determined to establish a system of pastoral care and social welfare which reflected biblical principles. He began by establishing schools, but the heart of his pastoral system lay in his division of his parish into manageable portions for social care. The parish was divided into 25 districts, each with somewhere between 60 and 100 families. It was over this group that his team established oversight, each district having an elder responsible for spiritual matters and a deacon concerned for social welfare. Chalmers not only oversaw the entire system but was himself closely and personally involved, visiting families as well as holding evening meetings. Chalmers was determined to demonstrate that voluntary relief was more effective than compulsory assessment and that this was possible in large cities. The system was based on personal relationships and self-help – all founded upon the principles set out in Scripture. The deacon spent an hour each week with their families which meant that they knew them individually and was thus better placed to support them, encourage them but

⁴³ Chalmers, *Natural Theology*, volume 2.4.4.6, in *Works*, page 128

⁴⁴ A.M.C. Waterman, *The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology, 1798-1833*, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol 34, number 2, April 1983

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, page 130

also to properly assess any request for assistance. This was the first major large-scale attempt to put the voluntary principle into action in a local area. How successful the experiment was, is contested.

How are we to assess Chalmers?

Positively he understood the human person not as a depository of 'rights' but as an individual with a will, a conscience, indeed, a moral personality. Concepts of the common good must not extinguish individual humanity. The intervention of the state had led to duties being replaced by rights, to dependency rather than freedom. However, in Chalmers, *any* role for government or the state was minimalist and viewed highly negatively.

The continuities then with Calvin are around the voluntary principle; the discontinuities are that Calvin had a more articulated view of civil government. To what extent is government interference required to achieve the common good? Later evangelicals such as Lord Shaftesbury held a positive, albeit limited, view of civic government (protecting the vulnerable) alongside the voluntary principle (education, social welfare). Many British evangelicals in the modern era have adopted a more state redistributive approach to common good. There is further debate to be had but we must not make a simplistic equation of common good and state provision. The issue is the extent to which 'common' in 'common good,' can be equated with the state, or as we will, see, more helpfully, with society.

Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801-1885), later the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, provides a later picture of how evangelical Protestants have responded to the common good.⁴⁶ Shaftesbury was primarily responsible for government legislation to protect the weak and vulnerable including the working of children in factories and mines, the employment of child sweeps, the protection of women workers and proper protection for those suffering from mental health breakdown. So, he clearly saw a role for the state. However, that role was limited. The voluntary Christian society was the great place where all Christians could come together for service. He saw this particularly with his work with the London City Mission and with Ragged Schools. However, He told the Ragged School Union (RSU), 'all who care for the advancement of Christ's kingdom, to whatever church they belong, must join together, heart and soul, for the purpose of bringing to completion this great, this mighty undertaking.'⁴⁷ In his view, the lay workers employed in the voluntary societies, whether paid missionaries, volunteer teachers, Scripture Readers or parish visitors were in by far the best position to assess social need. The advance of the state rather led to the collapse of the voluntary principle as so many social functions were taken over by government.

⁴⁶ Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury, the great reformer*, Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2010

⁴⁷ Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p216

Crucial to the purposes of the RSU was the idea of reaching those excluded from the other educational provisions of society. The second annual report referred to the aim of ‘removing every ragged, destitute child from our streets, and to the placing of that child in the path of industry and virtue.’⁴⁸ These aims found their outworking in the establishment of schools of industry attached to the ragged schools. Similarly, the ragged school movement led directly to the founding of the Shoeblocks Brigade to provide direct employment. At Old Pye Street school in Westminster a Juvenile Refuge and School of Industry was established with the RSU financing a tailor and a shoemaker as teachers of their trades – an apprenticeship model.

The extent and influence of the movement upon the poor grew rapidly. The first annual report noted twenty schools, 2,000 children and 200 teachers. The twenty-fourth report, in 1868, reported 257 schools with 31,357 scholars. The tenth report in 1854 reported on RSU activities covering industrial classes, Shoe-Black Brigades, Refuges, placing scholars in employment, emigration, mothers’ meetings, libraries, Penny Banks and Clothing Funds. By 1870 the list had expanded to cover meals societies, sanitary associations, libraries, flower shows, rag collecting, Shoe Clubs, Coal Clubs, Provident Clubs and Barrow Clubs. The last of these was a form of micro-finance, with individuals contributing to the Club, which then enabled loans to be made for barrows (or perhaps a potato oven) thus empowering individuals to make a living from selling vegetables. The impact of the RSU on the poor and as part of the evangelical Christian response to urban poverty and deprivation should not be underestimated.

For Shaftesbury and others like him, however, the voluntary society was essentially local and relational, neither of which could be said of government interventions. The attraction of the voluntary society for the advocates of political economy (‘the market’) was that it enabled the proper provision of social welfare to be kept separate from state intervention. It also allowed a distinction to be drawn between deserving and undeserving poverty. The voluntary visitor operating in a local area was quickly able to ascertain the degree to which applicants themselves were at fault. For both Shaftesbury and Chalmers, the essentially local nature of voluntary societies was crucial because it allowed for the relationships between families, donors, recipients and so on to be maintained. This more easily enabled relief to be temporary rather than becoming enshrined as a legal right; state aid depersonalised poverty relief. The increase in the power of the state in Victorian Britain was partly due to the fragmentation of the voluntary attempts to relieve poverty. There is persuasive evidence that there was a remarkable increase in the voluntary charity sector after 1850. Evangelical societies were central to this picture. Indeed, ‘as many as three-quarters of the total number of voluntary

⁴⁸ RSU, Second Annual Report, 1846, page 35

charitable organisations in the second half of the nineteenth century can be regarded as Evangelical in character and control.⁴⁹ The critics viewed the voluntary society as a place of social control and power but these societies provided an important contribution to the genuine search for solutions to poverty in accordance with the theological and economic worldview of most evangelical practitioners.

The language of the common good may not have been present, but Protestantism evangelicalism displayed many of the characteristics of common good teaching both theologically and practically; and, indeed, some also of the tensions.

Abraham Kuyper and the common good

Perhaps understanding at least *this* Protestant approach to common good can be helped by Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) ideas of 'sphere sovereignty.' In the space remaining we can only draw attention to a few ideas for further development. Kuyper was a remarkable and titanic figure in the Netherlands of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He edited newspapers, founded a university, led a major political party and served as Prime Minister. He is viewed as the father of Dutch neo-Calvinism and his thinking is important for the place of Christian believers exercising their role in the public square. Consequently, he contributes to our discussion of the common good. Irving Hexham suggests that both the evangelical 'right' and evangelical 'left' claim to be the authentic heirs to Kuyper's thought.⁵⁰ That, at least, reminds us he is not easily pigeon-holed.

His Lectures on Calvinism – originally the Stone Lectures - given at Princeton in 1898, are among his significant writings on the subject in English. For Kuyper, Calvinism (though he is quoting an earlier American historian here) is 'a theory of ontology, of ethics, of social happiness, and of human liberty, all derived from God.'⁵¹ Kuyper had set out something of his thinking about how Calvinism would contribute to the understanding of social and political theories in his speech on sphere sovereignty at the opening of the Free University in 1880; he was, though both brief and vague. Kuyper defines five spheres; the church, education, the family, the state and society. In discussing the common good we will concentrate on the last two. He regards the state as a consequence of the fall and hence its prime reason for existence is the negative reason given by Calvin, that is, the restraint of sin. So, Kuyper argues, 'God has instituted magistrates, by reason of sin.'⁵² The second sphere is society, composed of many different elements from the arts to business to the family.

⁴⁹ K. J. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, 1962, page 8

⁵⁰ Irving Hexham, 'Christian Politics According to Abraham Kuyper,' *Crux*, Vol XIX, no 1, March 1983, pp2-7

⁵¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1931, p15, quoting the historian George Bancroft

⁵² *Ibid.*, p81

Each of these elements has 'sovereignty in the individual social spheres and these different developments of social life have nothing above themselves but God, and the state cannot intrude here.'⁵³ Kuyper argues that this represents a middle way between statism and anarchy. The spheres all have their own responsibilities and, this side of the eschaton, are not simply to be reunited under one sphere, even God. Kuyper here seems closer to Chalmers or Shaftesbury and less so to Calvin. Society is organic, government is mechanistic, according to Kuyper. The role of the state is to avoid social conflict (by each sphere maintaining its own sovereignty), to defend the weak, and to maintain the overall unity of society. This reflects the tension we saw in Calvin between the role of the civil government and the responsibilities of the latter in respect of worship and doctrine. In this way Kuyper both empowers and limits the state, both empowers and limits the intermediary institutions of civil society.

Thus, Kuyper displays some ambiguity in discussion the state and society. Although his rationale for the state is primarily negative, he does seem to allow for a more positive view of civil government in a fallen world but does not develop it. He recognises that the state has some mandate to oversee or regulate the other spheres, not least to protect the weak from the powerful.⁵⁴ Common good is primarily the responsibility of the sphere of society, especially with its powerful expressions of localism, but the role of the state cannot be excluded; it is, however, limited. One might indeed argue that at sphere sovereignty does allow for and indeed reflect something at least of the principle of subsidiarity within common good teaching. Kuyper's theory also requires a virtuous and robust citizenry – individual flourishing as well as corporate.

Some scholars, not least Mark Noll and James Turner, argue that Kuyper's neo-Calvinism combines the warm heart of evangelicalism with 'furnished mind' necessary for public engagement.⁵⁵ However, for a Protestant thinker, Kuyper's observations proceed 'with modest biblical evidence and a minimum of theological elaboration.'⁵⁶ We have only scratched the surface, but in the midst of different language we can see the potential fruit of this approach for understanding the common good.

Conclusions

How then might one summarise a Protestant view of the common good? What are the commonalities and connections with the traditional expositions of the common good within

⁵³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p91

⁵⁴ James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2013, p145

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p380

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p133

Catholicism? What are the barriers? How might this common good teaching reach into the world of business and economics?

First, the commonalities and continuities. The most significant of these is the voluntary principle operating in an organic society of duties and responsibilities rather than rights. Society, family, intermediate institutions all have a significant role to play in maintaining the common good. This, of course, clearly fits with the principle of subsidiarity. There would be a great deal of wariness from our interlocutors about anything which diminished the role of the voluntary principle. Perhaps the relative rise of the role of the state and perhaps some confusion between the state and society has meant that this dynamic has become somewhat shrouded in mist. The discontinuity between our representative voices is perhaps this tension between positive and negative roles for the state and the relationship of the state and society. Calvin clearly articulated a positive role for the state, civil justice, conciliation, cherishing are all positive concepts in Calvin's view of civic society, a vision which does encompass social justice and which plays into the common good. The Protestant idea of common grace also helps link to the natural law approach of Catholicism in understanding the dignity of the human person. Of course, in reality, rather than Catholic or Protestant, these concepts are both examples of Christian theology. In Chalmers the state seems only to be a place of last resort. Shaftesbury was actually closer to Kuyper. Indeed, Kuyper's sphere sovereignty helps us in that it at least seeks to hold each sphere to its own sovereign role and is certainly a protection against an *excessive* role for the state. However, the interaction of state and society is less clear.

The barriers to a deeper understanding are primarily those of language and meaning, together with cultural differences in approach between Catholic and Protestant. These are real, but not insurmountable. The nature and the depth of exploration within Catholicism has left some Protestants floundering, unable to gather the tools and resources to engage more deeply from the perspective of their own tradition. This has sometimes left the impression of superficiality. This paper aims to be a corrective in this respect.

So, a Protestant view of the common good? Perhaps one in which there is a strong view of *society*, but nevertheless a well-articulated view of both the role of *civil government* (in both positive and negative senses) and the *voluntary* principle, a recognition of divine authority over all of society, one in which work is dignified, but so is the human person, one in which the bonds of society can be cherished without the state dominating.

In terms of the application to the economic sphere? Well, Kuyper's ideas help us here as we can reasonably understand the sphere of the economy as having its own rights and responsibilities, but also its own duties. This together with the dynamism of positive and negative roles for the state

encourage us to think in terms of business responsibility for wealth creation, yet a proper, but limited, role for regulation, and an integrity which recognises a higher authority over all things. Human dignity in work, reasonable levels of taxation and responsible ethical practices are all aspects of this view; all aspects in fact, of the common good. There are clear opportunities here for dialogue around common good between Catholic and Protestant traditions. As ever, Calvin has proved somewhat more helpful than his later disciples. As William Johnson has said, 'he chose to bring his major theological work to a climax with reflections *not* on the world to come but on our political responsibility for this world.'⁵⁷

Revd Dr Richard Turnbull, Oxford, June 2018

⁵⁷ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2009, p109