

Redemption

I WOULD like to consider the other element in my title of my theme, namely the *creation* of wealth. "Creation" is, of course, a traditional theological term, whatever else it may be. Traditional theology has always tried to investigate the question, "creation out of what?". One traditional answer (but only one) has been creation *ex nihilo* - creation out of nothing.

Actually, there is little stress on this understanding of creation in the main stream of the Bible. The more important understanding is that creation is a process of moving from chaos into order, of moving from darkness into light, moving from the disorder of the rule of the powers of darkness into the true authority of the Creator-Lord of all things¹².

So far, so good; it all sounds fairly straightforward, and perhaps without controversy. But then, we look at what we ourselves experience as the creation of wealth; it is inescapable for us that this creation seems to depend upon a continuous process of destruction. All innovation seems to involve the destruction or displacing of existing modes of production.

Creativity destroys earlier achievements and earlier skills; this appears to be inescapably tied up with the generation of wealth. How far can this be allowed to go? The questions of cost and sustainability in this understanding of creation are becoming more and more pressing upon us, as entirely practical issues, not merely as problems dreamed up by moral philosophers or romantic antiquarians.

If we uncritically accept this sort of understanding of creation, should we be surprised if it leads us to at least two very dubious further assumptions? The first is, that creation of wealth is to be measured by a

• *The Bishop of Shrewsbury, the Rt. Rev. JOHN D. DAVIES, concludes his study of the scriptures and the process of wealth creation.*

process in which the rich have their wealth increased in order to induce them to work hard, while the poor are kept poor in order to make them work hard.

The second is that we define "the creation of wealth" as a process which yields its results today, without reference to the future. As some very honest Afrikaners are saying, "even though we support the apartheid system, we recognise that we are being very unfair on our grandchildren". How far can we talk of a creation of wealth, if this is going to push the problem of the cost of maintaining the human race in future onto the generations which have still to come?

Perhaps we are unconsciously suffering from the effects of a shallow Christian teaching concerning immortality. The people who operated the law of Moses had very little idea of personal immortality; any future which they had was a future in their own descendents.

Therefore, the care for the land, and the treating of the land as a colleague which had to be given a time of rest at regular intervals, was a way of safeguarding the interests of future generations¹³. For some reason, the moral incentive to do this has become much weaker for members of our culture in recent years. I wonder whether Christian preaching has contributed to this state of affairs?

However this may be, there is one feature of the biblical doctrine of creation which I suggest ought to be taken very seriously if we are talking about "the creation of wealth". It is this: although the story of creation, in

the Book of Genesis, does come first in the ordering of the Scriptures, it is not the first story to be conceived and written down; nor is it really the first story in the logical order of development. It is put first in the Bible to make a sensible attempt at giving a historical shape to the process.

But actually the conviction which underlies the creation theme is, again, the sense that we are a *liberated people*. Because God has created us as a people, by bringing us out of slavery into nationhood, we recognise this one God to be the source of creative purpose in the world and the universe as a whole. Knowing this God as we do from our own experience of liberation, we attribute to this God the creative impulse for all movement which brings new things into being. That is the logic of the doctrine of the Creator. Our doctrine of creation depends upon the experience of *redemption*, rather than the other way round.

This raises very sharply the question, can a community which has not fully known redemption develop an authentic doctrine or vision of creation? And by creation in this context, of course I have to include the creation of wealth.

SO THEN, what are we talking about by this word "redemption"? Here, at least, we are firmly within the framework of economic terms. "Redemption" is, before anything else, an economic term. It is about deliverance from the condition of slavery¹⁴; it is about a change of condition from being valued entirely in terms of one's productivity on behalf of someone else, into being a free agent who

and the lands of freedom

is able to take responsibility for one's own labour and one's own contribution to the creation of wealth. This is the distinction between a slave and a free person. We seriously miss the meaning of "redemption" if we detach it too much from this fundamental economic root.

Christian slave-communities have known all about this. The songs which we rightly call "spirituals" were at first code-songs devised by negro slaves who were encouraging each others' dreams of getting out along the "Underground Railroad" to freedom. They were not allowed to talk, because their masters assumed that they would talk about escaping; but they were allowed to sing - and so they sang about escaping.

They sang about crossing the "Deep River" of Jordan. And "Jordan" had four meanings: the geographical meaning, the physical river in the Middle East; the historical meaning, the river crossed by Israel on the way into the Promised Land; the personal meaning, my own crossing over the personal boundary of my own death; and the practical, immediate meaning, of the hope of the present community, the very real, physical river, the Ohio, the boundary between the slave-state and the free. That was the river of "redemption", for those particular singing communities. What would be the practical "river of redemption" for our own communities?

Redemption is, and always was, a *deliverance from slavery*. Someone had to arrange this or pay for it. In the law of Moses, the redemption of the slave is closely linked to the redemption of the land¹⁵. Unless the land

itself, the source of wealth, is set free for the people, the slaves might as well not be set free.

The land is not permanently controlled by those who, by the changes and chances of history, happen to have gained control of the means of production¹⁶. Redemption is overcoming the alienation of the worker from the sources of wealth, the alienation of the worker from the wealth created by the work, and therefore the alienation of the worker from the work itself.

Jesus came into a situation where, as I have said, the people of the land were very deeply alienated from the processes of the creation of wealth. But he still treated people within that alienated situation as responsible moral agents¹⁷. He talked about forgiveness, but in doing so expressed himself in the traditional language concerning debt and the release from debt.

For Him, as for his predecessors, there was one verb which meant both what we call "forgive" and what we call "release" from debt. At the heart of his kingdom-prayer, he teaches us to pray that we may be released from our offences towards God just insofar as we release the debts of others¹⁸.

Those who pray this prayer, therefore, are involved with Jesus in a movement which picks up the old theme of creating a nation which does not depend upon or live according to a system of debt. This continued with the apostolic movement. Jesus had sent out his friends to be a community of forgiveness¹⁹; and the first sign that his spirit had come upon them was that they started to hold their wealth in common²⁰. A first mark of a redeemed com-

munity, therefore is its attitude to economic power.

How far are we a redeemed community? To be a slave means to be valued as a productive unit. In so far as a person is valued as a producer, and is labelled as such, and is non-valued as a non-producer and labelled as such, surely we are still in a state of non-redeemedness. Are we in a position, therefore, to claim to be involved authentically in the process which we have learned to call "creation"?

THE CHURCH itself has a particular contribution in this matter, even in one of its most domestic interest; why do we make a fuss about Sunday trading? Some Christians make quite a point of trying to reaffirm the values of the original Sabbath law; but the reason for this law was not just to bring everybody to Church. The Sabbath law was designed to ensure that, on one day out of the seven, people would be united as a redeemed community around the worship of God, so that the weekday distinctions of employer, employed and unemployed could be seen to be overruled. That is what we are standing for when we claim the Sabbath law. The Sabbath law was not primarily a ritual law; it was a labour law²¹.

The Commandment concerning the Sabbath includes both employer and employee, slave-owner and slave, equally. Even if there are conditions in which certain people are classified as slaves, these conditions are not to last indefinitely; they are interrupted every seventh day. There is, therefore, a degree of compromise in the process of

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"redemption". But everybody is affected by this process. No-one is excluded from it. So everybody can be said to share in the character of a liberated society, according to this law.

Redemption brings freedom. But this is a dangerous idea, which has got to be checked against the purpose of God at every point. The story of Exodus ought to have a Government Health Warning on it. We can see around us, among some white South Africans, among some communities in Northern Ireland, how the idea of being an Exodus-people can lead to being an exploiting and excluding community. The people who are redeemed by God are themselves those who are most sharply judged by God. They are called to live according to their redeemedness. And the whole biblical witness tells of people who are in one sense "free" but are not acting as redeemed people. There is even the man in the Gospels who was able to break the chains which bound him but was totally under the control of irrational demons²².

The time of the Reformation was a time of great claiming of the principle of redemption, the liberation of the human spirit. But Martin Luther was greatly distressed to see that some people immediately perverted the new freedom by claiming it as a freedom to do what they liked with their own property:

"If I be free then I may do what I like; this thing is mine own, why then should I not sell it for as much as I may get? Moreover, seeing we obtain not salvation by our good works, why should we give anything to the poor? Thus do they most carelessly shake off the yoke and bondage of the flesh and turn the liberty of the spirit into wantonness and fleshly liberty.

"But", says Martin Luther, "we will tell such careless contemners

*(although they believe us not, but laugh us to scorn) that if they use their bodies and their goods after their own lust (as indeed they do, for they neither help the poor, nor lend to the needy, but beguile their brethren in bargaining, snatching and scraping into themselves by hook or by crook whatsoever they can), we tell them (I say) that they be not free, brag they never so much of their liberty, but have lost Christ and Christian liberty, are become bond slaves of the devil, and are seven times worse under the name of Christian liberty, than they were before under the tyranny of the Pope"*²³.

So, if we pride ourselves on a freedom, a freedom in the market or a freedom from slavery or any other kind of freedom, we do have to ask very carefully "freedom for whom"? Our theological inheritance ought to give us certain checks to see whether our freedom is really a freedom of having been redeemed.

THE LAW makes it very clear that there is a close identification between slavery and debt²⁴. The slave is in a state of constant indebtedness to the slave-owner. The slave does not own his or her life. Slavery is often imposed because a debt has been incurred which cannot be paid by money and has, therefore, to be paid by a period of unrewarded labour - labour which is entirely for the benefit of the owner and not for the slave. So the whole apparatus of debt is seen as part of the problem, not as part of the solution. It is evidence of something positively out of joint, in the design of creation.

Where does this leave us, who share in an economic culture largely shaped by debt? Economic activity appears to be largely a system of exchanging the papers which are evidence of our indebtedness; this kind of operation is even credited with

being, in itself, the process of "the creation of wealth". The "performance" of a company is judged by the way in which its debt-system is valued in the processes of exchange, rather than in the quality of its products or its success in satisfying the needs of the community.

If this, in the eyes of an outsider, seems absurd, it is no more absurd than the state of mind into which we seem to have got in our Churches; we decide whether a church is a proper church by checking the orthodoxy of its management-system, i.e. the "validity" of the ordination of its ministers. Surely the right way of deciding whether a church is authentic is by seeing if it is producing the fruit of the spirit and the signs of the kingdom?

As with many organisations, this is a kind of structured fantasy, in which we measure the quality of the organisation by criteria which have little to do with the actual product or purpose for which the organisation is originally formed.

I suggest that there are signs of our *unredeemedness* at many points in our social and economic life. Within our own country, we wrestle at present with the disappointment in our attempts to operate a welfare state which is founded on the notion that I am my brother's keeper, and we find that the wealth to sustain it is not reliably being supplied from an economy which is based upon the principle that I am my brother's competitor.

In practice, our energies in the individual supplying of want, have been more vigorous than our energies in the corporate supplying of needs. This, in turn, suggests that our education of conscience has not moved as quickly as our education in techniques.

Even if, within the limits of the economic system of one nation-state, the system of debt works reasonably effectively as a component within the wealth-generating engine, it can create great problems at a more *international level*. There, we see more clearly the truth of the biblical witness, that systems of debt and of accumulation lead to poverty. I pointed out before, that magic and sorcery operate for the further disadvantage of the disadvantaged. To a man like President Nyerere, the international debt system, with its massive increase in interest rates, presents the dilemma of "do I pay our debts or do I feed our people"? Or, who controls the price paid to tea-workers in Sri Lanka or tobacco-workers in Malawi? The system is devised to generate as much money-wealth in the purchasing countries as possible. It has been devised in their interest.

We try to correct the balance by aid; but the aid does not even meet the cost of servicing the debt, so it does not go very far in assisting the poor and the hungry. In such a case, aid is not generosity; it is the first stage of justice. In the words of St. Ambrose, "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person: you are handing over to him what is his"²⁵. Such aid is the restoration of unpaid value, due to the poor for the low prices which they have received for primary products. All the aid in the world at present going from rich to poor countries does not compensate for the flow of wealth from the poor towards the rich.

So the most important problem of conscience for the rich is not how to give to the poor but how to stop taking from the poor. And that is a redemption question. It is a question of the meaning of salvation. So, for

instance, in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, we see that when Zacchaeus announces his intention of practicing voluntary justice and fining himself for the cheating of the poor, this is quite specifically described as salvation²⁶. In our day, we need to find meanings for "redemption" and "salvation" which will be at least as realistic as those meanings which we find in the Old and New Testaments.

I DO NOT pretend that I have contributed at all to the technical question of how, in fact, we go about to create wealth.

But very often, the task of Christian theology is not to increase technical competence but to raise questions about motives, about purposes, and about fantasies hidden within conventional language.

After the last election, one of the national newspapers carried a leading article which expressed a lot of sympathy for the opposition parties and for other groups of people who had been looking forward to some sort of change in our national life and priorities. But, said this newspaper, none of these alternative

groups is able to show that it really understands the processes by which wealth is actually created.

And, unless you can show that you do, you are not credibly in business in today's world. Well, I think that I grasp what that newspaper was getting at. But it implied that we all understand and agree upon the meaning of "creation of wealth". And, therefore, what is needed is competent engagement with the technical processes involved.

All I have tried to do is to confuse the issue a bit, and to suggest that there may be more to the notion of "the creation of wealth" than normally, in our culture, meets the eye.

Whatever else we may or may not get from some biblical reflection, one thing has to be very clear. "Wealth" and "the economy" are not independent forces or mindless super-human powers. They are brought about by human beings making decisions. They are proper areas for consideration by people who believe that they have the power to make moral choices. To say this, in the face of the public image which is given of "the market" and "the city" is in fact a defiant statement of *belief*. Like all serious belief, it does not immediately accord with the obvious evidence of the senses. The God of the Bible does address human beings, both the powerful and the powerless, as responsible agents. And this applies to financial and political structures as much as it does to personal behaviour.

So, strange though it may seem, it is up to us. We should listen very carefully when the science of economics tells us that there is no such thing as a free lunch; but we should not interpret that warning as a law about where we should go to steal one.

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