

CHRISTIANITY  
AND THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER



*John Atherton* is Visiting Professor at Chester University, Honorary Senior Research Fellow of the William Temple Foundation, and Canon Emeritus of Manchester. He has served in the inner cities of Aberdeen, Glasgow and Manchester, worked for the William Temple Foundation, and been Canon Theologian of Manchester Cathedral. After acting as consultant to the Faith in the City process, he has focused on exploring the relationship between religion and economic affairs. He has written numerous books, the last being *Transforming Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change* (SCM 2008).

*Chris Baker* is Director of Research for the William Temple Foundation, Senior Lecturer in Public and Urban Theology at the University of Chester and Director for the Centre for Faiths and Public Policy at the same university. He has researched and published widely on the role and contribution to civil society, public policy, social welfare and urban regeneration. His most recent publication is *Postsecular Cities: Space, theory and practice* (co-edited with Justin Beaumont, Continuum, 211).

*John Reader* is Rector of the Ironstone Benefice in the Diocese of Oxford and an Honorary Senior Research Fellow with the William Temple Foundation. He has taught on a number of courses and been Director of Pastoral Theology at a theological college. His books include *Local Theology* (SPCK); *Blurred Encounters* (Aureus); *Reconstructing Practical Theology* (Ashgate) and *Encountering the New Theological Space*, co-edited with Chris Baker (Ashgate). He is also a visiting scholar at OxCEPT based at Ripon College, Cuddesdon.



# CHRISTIANITY AND THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER

A manifesto for a fairer future

JOHN ATHERTON, CHRIS BAKER  
and JOHN READER



First published in Great Britain in 2011

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
[www.spckpublishing.co.uk](http://www.spckpublishing.co.uk)

Copyright © John Atherton, Chris Baker and John Reader 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the external website and email addresses included in this book are correct and up to date at the time of going to press.

The author and publisher are not responsible for the content, quality or continuing accessibility of the sites.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-06360-4

Typeset by Caroline Waldron, Wirral, Cheshire  
First printed in Great Britain by MPG Books  
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

*To William Temple (1881–1944)  
and William Beveridge (1879–1963)  
for a heritage informing our visions*



# Contents

<i>Foreword by Richard Layard</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
1 Religion and the public square: Temple revisited, or ‘We don’t do God around here’	1
2 Happiness is more than £ shaped: The pursuit of wellbeing	22
3 Promoting a wellbeing economy	45
4 Faiths and the new social and welfare policy: How do we understand the Big Society?	75
5 Things can now be different: A suggested programme	108
<i>Further reading</i>	132
<i>Index</i>	134



# Foreword

Like so many of my generation, I was greatly influenced by Temple and by Beveridge. So I greatly welcome this bold attempt to update their ideas for the modern age. Especially welcome is the focus on human wellbeing as the central concept for this purpose.

The wellbeing movement has many roots, some of them secular. A major impulse comes from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. But whatever the roots, the basic idea is profoundly important – that the ultimate reality for humans is the quality of their inner life. There is thus a welcome common ground between people of faith who stress the importance of spiritual experience and those who are at most deist but who also believe that man cannot live by bread alone.

So when we consider public policy, we can now see a serious shortcoming in Beveridge's vision for the welfare state. His five giants spreading social distress did not include mental illness, nor all the dysfunctional behaviours, such as family break-up, which cause so many of our present discontents.

The elimination of absolute poverty and the massive progress in education and health and housing have not liberated the human spirit in the way that was hoped for. At the same time trust between individuals has eroded – half as many people now believe that 'most other people can be trusted' as did so 50 years ago.

So a better society has to be based on two things. First, it requires better values. No social system is value-free and, as this book so eloquently describes, much of our society (and especially the financial system) has become based on the idea that selfishness is natural and therefore acceptable. But values are not enough; second, we also need evidence on what promotes human wellbeing, as Temple stressed. And we now have a serious weight of evidence acquired over the last 30 years through the

new science, based on measuring people's wellbeing and studying what factors support it.

Many of these factors are central features in this book. They include the quality of early childhood experience, now a major focus of interest in all political parties. They include the availability of work, and of work that satisfies. There is now at last an understanding that work is good for wellbeing. Beveridge understood this well but unfortunately many of his followers have urged us to adapt to 'the end of work' by providing unconditional handouts. This book quite rightly rejects that approach. And then there is equality. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown powerfully how a more equal society benefits not only the poorest in society but the richest – by generating a world of greater mutual respect. So in the end the nature of values is crucial.

Some people think that cultural trends cannot be reversed. But history shows otherwise. In the eighteenth century there was a steady growth of individualism, but in the early nineteenth century there began a steady increase in social responsibility. The time is ripe for a similar turning of the tide. It will come, I am sure, from many quarters. The newly launched movement called Action for Happiness aims to contribute to it, by promoting the importance of wellbeing as an objective of public policy and as the goal of how we should live – by creating as much happiness as we can in the world around us, and above all as little misery. We very much hope that people of faith will join this movement.

So this book is very timely. For some years there has been growing disillusion with material progress as the be-all of life. Mental illness is growing among our young people, for lack of worthwhile objectives for living. We need a spiritual revival, based on permanent values and modern science. This book makes a significant contribution to that great end.

*Richard Layard*

# Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the many people and creative partnerships whose work has inspired and shaped the thinking and research carried out by the William Temple Foundation in the past few years. In relation to the foundation's work on religion, happiness and wellbeing we are grateful to Professor Elaine Graham and Professor Ian Steedman, and for colleagues in Sweden who share similar outlooks and approaches, in particular Professor Carl-Henric Grenholm. In relation to its work on political economy we are grateful for our conversation partners, including Dr Patrick Riordan, Robert Peston and Hannah Skinner. In relation to our work on religious and spiritual capital, we are grateful to some outstanding researchers who have contributed to the Leverhulme research programme: Dr Jonathan Miles-Watson, Dr Rana Jawad and Greg Smith. In relation to the foundation's work on urbanization and religion and the postsecular city, we are grateful for partnerships and synergies of thought with Professor Justin Beaumont and Professor Paul Cloke.

Finally, we give thanks for the life and work of Vannie Ather-ton, John's partner in life, whose warmth, steadfast support and irrepressible wit touched the hearts of all who met her.



# Introduction

At the conclusion to his recent survey of the state of British society, entitled *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*, the social psychologist David Halpern reflects on the challenges posed by the current deeply rooted sense of economic malaise and political mistrust. He writes:

Some politicians and protesters are asking not just how will we get through the current crisis, but what is the better world that we will build beyond it. At a recent discussion in No. 10, someone made the parallel to the Beveridge report, a plan for a new welfare state written in some of the darkest hours of the Second World War. It offered a practical vision for a fairer and more supportive society, not just a return to the pre-war status quo. More than 600,000 copies of the report were published, and it was distributed not only to British troops, but dropped behind German lines to make the case for what a democratic society could offer. The question today is, what is our equivalent – our vision for a better world in the post credit-crunch era?<sup>1</sup>

This stark question, raised by a leading academic and influential government policy advisor for New Labour, powerfully frames the starting point of this book and the arguments that will be developed from it. Yet Halpern's analysis misses a vital component. The 'practical vision for a fairer and more supportive society' does not and cannot rest on technocratic solutions alone. Seventy years ago, in those 'darkest hours', the practical vision offered by Beveridge also relied on a pragmatic but inspiring vision of a new social order, emerging from a set of religious and ethical traditions and sources – what might be called a religio-ethical framework. That framework was supplied by a slim volume published by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, entitled *Christianity and Social Order*. Like the Beveridge Report, it sold tens of thousands of copies (139,000 of the 1942 Penguin edition alone), and was also distributed to British troops serving at home and overseas. Temple was a lifelong friend of Beveridge and the

two volumes were seen at the time as a symbiotic pairing, both addressing the same side of the coin, but from two very different perspectives – the one political, the other theological.

We believe, 70 years on, that the current challenge – of how we can create a more equal and progressive society in the face of the sense of deep crisis identified by Halpern (including not only economic, political and social, but also environmental challenges) – will similarly benefit from a rigorous contribution from within a religio-ethical framework. Just as the prototype *Christianity and Social Order* spoke directly, with Christian clarity, pragmatic purpose and a sense of hope, into arguably the darkest days of crisis faced by the UK in modern history, so, we propose, it still speaks with considerable Christian clarity, pragmatic purpose and hope into the present era's crises, both national and global.

But it is also important to say that this will be no slavish and uncritical application of a 70-year-old text to the present climate. Instead we will seek to provide a rigorous assessment of how the social order has changed in the 70 years since *Christianity and Social Order* was published (hence this book's title of *Christianity and the New Social Order*). Some of Temple's working assumptions and conclusions are (unsurprisingly) no longer able to provide the critical analysis and guidance required for the present age. Yet certain theological and ethical principles, and the middle axioms (i.e. directions for broad areas of public policy drawn from foundational theological and ethical categories) that can be derived from them, continue to have the potential to powerfully shape contemporary public debate about the future of economics, politics and welfare in the UK.

The aim of this book is also to speak plainly and from the heart into the set of challenges and opportunities now faced by UK society within the context of rapid and global change. Here again we aim to reflect something of the theological vision and tradition that Temple epitomized; Anglican but ecumenical, and firmly rooted in mainstream incarnational principles that speak powerfully of pragmatism and hospitality.

We hope to use Temple's original book as a springboard into a brief but strategic analysis of the current and future role of

Christianity as a moral and national resource for analysing the current shifts in society, and for producing the basis of broad policy outcomes that will shape the structures and ethos of British society towards more loving, just and sustainable ends.

## **2011 – taking the critical debate forward**

It is our task in this book to critically examine the legacy of William Temple's vision of a good social order for today's set of experiences and issues, and its pertinence as a tool of critical analysis and strategic planning for the political economy of today. This will be done via a series of thematic chapters, which look at the different aspects of social order raised by Temple's original. Each chapter will make reference to those aspects of the thinking laid out by Temple in *Christianity and Social Order* that are relevant to the theme of the chapter in question, in order to highlight both the continuities and discontinuities between Temple's context and his diagnosis and the present era.

Thus, in the first chapter, we explore the new public space into which religion in the UK must now engage. We recognize that the sharply edged distinctions between the secular and the religious into which Temple had to speak no longer exist. The first three chapters of *Christianity and Social Order* were spent offering an apologetic as to why (after 300 years of self-imposed exile) the Church should dare to interfere in the public domain of economics and politics. The current context suggests a revisioning of these static and rigid borders as secular modernity goes through something of a crisis of identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The new social order is characterized by a greater fluidity and multiplicity of identities, voices and methods of analysis and practice, and above all by a trend towards either greater reflexivity or greater certainty. That trend carries with it the rise in extreme and fundamentalist religious or political identities – or in some cases both. The first chapter begins to map out this new postsecular public terrain and examines what strategies might now be open to the Church by which to engage with others in the creation of a new, just social order.

## *Introduction*

In Chapter 2, we chart the rise of the happiness and wellbeing agenda. This was something that Temple was prescient in pointing out, articulating the importance of a well-balanced and just social order in which each person has not only the security of knowing he or she belongs and is valued, but also the encouragement and facilitation (via the apparatus of a benign state) to develop into an emotionally competent and resilient citizen. The chapter also explores the close connections that now exist within a whole series of different literatures concerning the links between religious and spiritual belief and practice on the one hand, and wellbeing and happiness on the other, and the sort of political economy we need to create in order to further harness the benefits of both.

Chapter 3 charts the persistent relationship between religion and economic theory and practice (a point made by Temple himself). However, in ways that perhaps he could only have dreamt of, the latest phase of this debate has entered an increasingly shared space in which several global economists are now convinced of the importance of relocating economic theory towards more ethical and value-driven ends. This is in stark contrast to those who see economics as a detached science based on apparently secure theories about the predictable and rational way in which human beings behave. Not only have recent global banking crises called into question the positivistic assumptions made by economic science and theory, but the call for economics to rediscover larger ethical aims and outcomes clearly resonates with the latest work in various branches of theology, including Christian social ethics, practical and public theologies. However, there is still the need for a critical edge to this newly productive series of conversations in order to preserve the authentic yet pragmatic Christian voice that Temple was keen to safeguard in what felt like perhaps more hostile times.

Chapter 4 looks at Temple's ideas of the welfare state and charts the shifts in social and policy change that have occurred since its establishment in 1948. We then consider the current situation and speculate as to the contribution Temple's theological anthropology and vision for the social order can make to the emerging political

## *Introduction*

ideas and practices that are shaping current welfare and public policy debates. These ideas and practices include the shift to more devolved forms of welfare which increasingly blur the traditional roles of professional and volunteer and the language used by both the faith and non-faith sectors. This could have the effect of ‘secularization by the back door’ for those faith groups who feel compelled, in a welfare system now dominated by competitive tendering and the language of enterprise, to present themselves like other voluntary organizations, and thus lose their distinctive and critical edge.

The final chapter attempts to update Temple’s middle axioms (although for reasons that are explained in that chapter, we call them ‘guidelines’) for a postsecular social order. These will form the basis of a manifesto that we hope will be an important contribution to wider debates as the second decade of the twenty-first century unfolds, in terms of the virtues and practical directions that will address the major deficits in public life. The new middle axioms will include the following areas of social policy: the nurturing of children in the material-immaterial experiences of life; the commitment to education as lifelong learning; developing health as personal and communal wholeness; recognizing the importance of income and work for wellbeing; fostering care and delight in the good stewardship of the created order and environment (including an unequivocal regard to its sustainability); promoting an ethical finance, including the subordination of financial systems to the personal and common good of all; and promoting more egalitarian societies and ways of living, including the distribution of income, wealth and culture.

There is not the space and time in this deliberately slim volume to do justice to the full splendour of Temple’s original (although we are pleased that several others have attempted to do so). But we would like to conclude this introduction with just three themes that express why we think Temple is still an important and resonant resource for today’s political economy.

