

Chris Tyack address

September 2019

The Humanising Mission of the Church

I want this morning to offer a Christian and ecclesial perspective on our cultural situation—and the humanising mission of the Church. There is a mood of cultural crisis abroad. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, as the poet said. So it will be good to take as a touchstone the political thought of St Augustine, who himself lived through anxious times. In the fourth century, Rome had fallen. Pagan critics were blaming the Church for critically weakening the social fabric, opening the way for defeat. Augustine's answer is the compendious work, *The City of God*. No, he says, the cultural crisis which beset Rome had a far deeper basis—in that old frailty of the human person, unbridled desire. Rome had grown decadent; and in their self-interest and cynicism had turned away from God. People had grown forgetful of their neighbour, along with the social bond itself. For there is indeed such a thing as a social bond. As Augustine would say, it is the bond of charity (*vinculum caritatis*); and this bond is, of course, just the God who is love.

Augustine assumes the voice of a rich and effete Roman politician:

This is our concern, that everyone increase his wealth to supply his daily whims, and that the powerful subject the weak for their own purposes... Let the law recognise the injury done to another's property, rather than to another's [humanity]. ... Let there be a plentiful supply of public prostitutes for everyone who wishes to use them, but especially those who are too poor to keep one for their private use. Let there be built houses of the largest and most ornate kind: let there be the most sumptuous banquets... Let there be everywhere heard the rustling of dancers...; let a succession of the most cruel and voluptuous pleasures maintain a constant excitement. If such happiness is distasteful to any, let him be branded a public enemy...

It isn't so different from our own cultural situation, is it?

Let me say quickly that I don't want to deny there is a sphere of legitimate self-interest, and nor, I believe, would the saint. We can hardly leave the earthly city, with its planning and contracting and profit. What he claims is that this city can become soulless and forsaken and deeply fragile if the true city, what Augustine calls "the city of God," is not to be found there. Cultures which exalt self-interest can go bad, if they are not restrained by significant sites of

friendship and ethical formation, in which we can renew our humanity. I want to emphasise his insight that these cultures go bad in a particular way: the city of unbridled desire becomes the city of unbridled control. *Libido*, desire, becomes *libido dominandi*, the lust to control—as human openness one to another, often with a shared hinterland of memory, is replaced by policing. The lights go out, and there is a fall. “Rome,” he says, “though mistress of the nations, was herself ruled by her lust of rule.”

Augustine has many contemporary followers. Consider the Anglican theologian, John Milbank, who in *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* says this:

We have entered into what the American novelist William Burroughs first described as a ‘society of control’ where people are increasingly subject to manipulation at a subliminal level. The spiritual...is avoided in such a way that people become saturated by their own multiple choices, which must eventually bore them, but from which they no longer have the capacity to escape. Many pathologies inevitably ensue as a result of over-consumption and debilitation of our capacities to reason and select: obesity, anorexia, bulimia, attention deficit disorder, drug-abuse, depression, self-harming, as well as increasingly devious, uncivil and sporadically violent behaviour.

Isn't one recent mutation of the *libido dominandi* a frightening surveillance capitalism—a world where big data is watching, indeed where everyone seems to be watching everyone? As Milbank himself says:

..[D]espair of one's sexual future in a world of increased infidelity and abandonment, fear of old age as a state of indignity rather than honour, a culture devoted to the cult of permanent youth, psychic overload and confusion, perpetual banal sunlight with no nocturnal pauses, all tend to engender a literally suicidal culture, now obscenely encouraged by legalised medicinal murder.

Without places of friendship and ethical formation, we all suffer. “The city of God” is not, in any straightforward way to be identified with the Christian Church or with any institution. It really describes a humane pattern of desire, of which we are all capable—not love of self, but the love of God which finds practical expression in love of our brothers and sisters. It is self-transcending love; it is social concern.

In this realm there is an overturning of worldly standards of merit. The rich and privileged and powerful are not so in the great city, the great commonwealth of God; there is a fundamental equality because before God all of us are poor, all of us powerless. We bring nothing in our hands—for everything we have and are already belongs to God. As the psalmist says, the “I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine.” All that we might do is give thanks, and show love and mercy one to another; and this is just to lay hold of our humanity, too. Isn’t that the sacrifice God desires? We relinquish our earthly status; we relinquish control. We become capable of friendship again, indeed with people who are quite unlike us. Ethical formation becomes possible again—by which I mean formation in virtue, in habits of friendship, not in law and in rights. I believe that, if this religious sense of human equality ceases to be known among us, there is reason to fear for our culture.

Yet let me say, the error of socialisms past and present has been to try to impose equality in the earthly city—where people naturally have different gifts and capacities, different backgrounds and histories. Human equality really is a religious sentiment. It is realised in the worshipping community; it is partially realised in civil society. Yet to impose equality is surely to confuse Augustine’s two realms—both of which are necessary counterweights, but which ought not be confused.

2.

In the city of desire, the city of control, the Church is surely called to be a place for laying hold of our humanity.

We come to Church. We are drawn out of ourselves, out of our preoccupations and anxieties. Everyone comes to the altar, in their poverty and equality, to share a common loaf and a common cup. We are incorporated in Christ. This ritual, at the heart of the Church’s life, is about our humanisation, for Christ is, so the Apostle Paul says, the New Human Being—the New Adam. Sometimes, when we eat and drink with our brothers and sisters, a mystical common humanity shines out. Christ shines out, in a moment of joy and gladness.

The sacrifice we make to God is just this common life. Augustine says this: “This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful,

in which she teaches that she herself is offered.” The city of God is offered up, a living sacrifice.

Much more could be said. Perhaps I will just mention a few ways in which religious practice can help us to lay hold of our humanity—with reference to a short, excellent book I read the other day by Rowan Williams, called *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (2019).

First, we can learn to depend on other people in a healthy way. We take the risk of friendship; we tell our stories, and we listen to many more. We learn a broader human sympathy. All sorts of weird and wonderful people are out there, believe me. Indeed, so much therapy happens over tea after the Church service—just spending time with other people, whoever they are, not feeling you need to assert yourself or say anything special, but just happy to be there. Incidentally, there is one man in my parish with a para-military background, who tells how this sort of letting go, this renunciation of control, has helped his recovery from PTSD. These simple, non-combative encounters have helped him.

Second, we can learn a new relationship to time. “Increasingly,” says Williams, “one of the marks of a fully and uncompromisingly secular environment is the notion of undifferentiated time. There are, for mature late capitalism, no such things as weekends. The problem with this kind of secularism is not so much a denial of the existence of God as the denial of the possibility of leisure—of time that is not spent in serving the market.” We keep sacred time. We keep the Christian Sabbath, our great day of rest and festival. We keep going back to the practices, the stories, in celebration and commemoration. So we remember that time need not be an amnesiac rushing on, from one thing to the next, but can also be rhythmic: we can still find depth, replenishing ourselves in a tradition.

And last, we can accept our mortality. I was listening again last night to the sad but beautiful setting of the burial sentences by Henry Purcell. *Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow....* . The Church has a rich repertoire of lament, if only it were known. Williams says, “[m]ortality means that every project we have is limited. There is something non-negotiable about that absolute limit, and there is an ultimate challenge in that to any fantasy or fiction of the all-powerful ego. It is resistance to mortality – the ‘denial of death’ ...--that takes us into the worst pathologies of power, the imagined power to rebel against the ultimate limit, the fact that we are going to die.”

In ways like these, we can lay hold of our humanity again—even in a dark time.

3.

A brief word about politics in the earthly city.

The mission of the Church, the task for us all, is to discern what a truly human society might look like.

To my mind, there is huge scope for a politics in the Western, Christian tradition that resists cultures of control. I have touched upon one error of socialism already; another is to expect the State to be the Church, as if we no longer needed the historic, Western tradition of mercy and help of the poor. Second, I believe we should restrain the erosion of civil liberties, as well as corporate surveillance and manipulation. The proliferation of CCTV and low-level policing, for instance, is an astonishing development, which makes obedience to rule the principle of human association, rather than the good disposition of the human person. At the heart of our common life is mistrust.

Indeed, we might be a good deal more critical of all sorts of new technologies. Just as bioethics has proved its worth, is there room to fund ethical research into technology? We don't introduce new clinical treatments without ethical review, yet new and invasive technologies, including even artificial intelligence, seem to win uncritical acclaim. So before we rush headlong into a transhuman future, let's examine the likely effect of new technologies on our humanity and culture.

If there is a "third way," (a much maligned term I know) surely it is in equipping and resourcing civil society—the whole voluntary and altruistic sector, including churches and schools. These are the vital sites of friendship and ethical formation wherein we can renew our humanity—and, to my mind, the most significant countervailing forces to the market. Indeed, I would like to see governments give over responsibility for service delivery to the historic churches, with suitable funding. They can reward creative forms of social entrepreneurship. They might assist organisations like the Brotherhood of St Lawrence to engage in research and constructive advocacy.

Perhaps this is to sing in a new key—because so much conservatism has spoken not of the "community" but of "the family" as the major countervailing force to the marketplace. Yet I cannot help but feel that the family is being made to bear too much weight. Isn't so much of our talk about family sentimental? Many parents struggle to talk to their children, let alone impart values, with the onslaught of marketing and virtual cultures. Many of them are time-

poor, and—consequently, many spend their early childhood years in childcare. So I am not sure the family can continue to be the bulwark it once seemed to be in the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, these days many people simply have no family of their own, with some 40% of the population in the last census being single (widowed, separated, divorced, or never married). For reasons like this I would like to see conservative parties renew their commitment to community life—a category which includes Church, family, and everyone else. Healthy families open out onto the life of the community; and in the Western tradition, the socialisation of children crucially involved their induction into the ecclesial body—the great family of no lineage biological at all. There they learn social skills and that broader human sympathy, beyond the inevitable tribalisms of wealth and class.

Finally, I would like to see conservative parties in particular reassess their overvaluation of work. The loss of Sunday as a common day of rest, on the basis of purely utilitarian arguments about convenience, is for us all a grievous wound. The Sabbath rest, as Jesus received the Jewish tradition, was intended to be a great day for humanity—a day of community and festival where class differences fall away, and we remember our common humanity under God. Israel also remembered its liberation from slavery in Egypt, keeping that day as a way of resistance to any regime of ‘total work’ or, we might say, cultures of control.

The touchstone of a new politics, a Christian cultural politics, will be the human being. It is our task is to discern what is the width and breadth of a truly human society; in this the Church can be a vital spiritual resource, a deep well of vision and help. For, as Paul VI said, “There is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute, and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning.” This was the vision that inspired me, and can still inspire others.

Chris Tyack