

## **You Get What You Pay (Vote) For**

The last month or so has seen great mass political movements of people in northern Africa and the Middle East to express their dissatisfaction at their countries' status quo. They have done it at the cost of lives and economic security. They have toppled corrupt regimes and declared a great thirst for freedom and decent lives.[1] The people of Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Yemen and others are the symptoms of what many, including Christians, have been pointing out for decades: the gap between rich and poor is widening and the young know it and feel it.[2]

Our contemporary society is maintained by a growing gap between the rich and the poor. There is a class struggle going on but we may not speak its name. Warren Buffet, however, does, and he says that his class is winning it. That gap is going to be at the heart of most social protest we will see in the coming months and years. Rising oil prices, food and water security along with joblessness will be the detonators.[3] We will not see here the sort of popular protest we have seen in Tunis, Benghazi and Cairo. But social protest will be more frequent. Here in Devon the cuts are already biting. In the last few weeks hundreds of jobs are beginning to disappear. Even the Charity shops—I volunteer in one—are feeling an oncoming pinch.

### **Short History**

We have come a long way from before and since the failure of Northern Rock in August of 2008.[4] In the early years of the new century there was a bubble boom in the form of rising house prices here and in the USA. Before that in 1989 the 'Big Bang' occurred in The City. It put an end to 'gentlemanly capitalism'. Hungry US giants appeared and scented the blood of English financial expertise. All of a sudden there were power lunches, voracious head hunting and to-die-for salaries and bonuses. Names like Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers became coin of the realm. The old ethos which dictated that old Etonians dealt with old Etonians was obliterated by big bear hug graduates of Harvard Business and Stanford University.

During that same time a large number of mutually-owned societies became independent banks. These provided the major portion of house mortgages and by 2007/08 had become subsidiaries of the major banks. New financial instruments appeared. They were so complicated that not even their inventors, much less senior management and the regulators, could adequately explain them. It seems the more arcane and mysterious, the more likely they were to reward the investor. The financial sector grew. Agriculture and manufacture shrank. Individual and corporate indebtedness swelled.

Finally there was a change in accounting standards and procedures which permitted what formerly was regarded as liabilities to be seen as assets. Banks and corporations the likes of Lehman Brothers, the Dutch Ambro Bank, Northern Rock, the Royal Bank of Scotland rode off into the sunshine and ended up in the gulch.

One of the great current fictions, disseminated by the Coalition, is that the previous government got us into this mess. The mess is the making of a relatively small group of financial managers and sales personnel who fancied themselves 'Lords of the Universe'. Our politicians let themselves be seduced and patronised by the elite of Big Finance and Big Banking. They could not avoid colluding with them. Their noses crinkled not a bit at the smell of dubious money. After all, they were all in it together.

### **The Present Situation**

That condensed history underlines a sad fact about our polity: how very weak it is. How did such a relatively small group of financial wizards bring down our economy? What sort of leverage, or contacts, or influence, winks and nods or other mechanisms were at their command that they were able to do the damage that they wreaked? What ethical code or implicit morality guided them? How can they still thumb their noses at us as they collect their bonuses? How can our leadership let them? Are they more powerful or more influential or is the leadership beholden to them? Are the banks really too big to fail? Or is the government too unwilling to confront?

There is also something sad about our politics: our politicians need not consult us. Sure, there are surgeries and we write to our MPs. I suspect, nevertheless, that it is merely anecdotal.[5] The last Parliament spent 700 hours debating the new hunting legislation and 7 hours debating going to war in Iraq. There is, perhaps more grievously, something sad about our political ethos: we no longer have an implicit model of what a good and just society looks like, nor an ethical profile of a citizen fit to participate in that society. There does not seem to be a moral compass to guide us nor an ethical code to govern us.[6] At the level of governance we have men and women who tell us—and we have not demurred—that they are fit to manage our security, our welfare and the future of our society and of the planet. To be good citizens we are told to consume, go shopping and spend our plastic to breaking point. We seem to have gotten what we voted [7] for.

We have embarked upon an era of 'post-politics'. In this era *realpolitik* is done over a few cocktails in the bar of a patron's yacht. When a bank contributes money to all the major parties in a political campaign; when a millionaire contributes money to his political party of preference, there is no such thing as handing in a wish list—nothing so vulgar or blatant as that. The Party which receives the donation knows perfectly well what is expected: bonuses will

be protected, tax havens will remain secure; non-dom status will remain unquestioned, low death and inheritance taxes, low capital gains and corporate taxes etc.

We are also in an era of a new aristocracy (rule by the best), spawn of the experience of life in The City. They are not the grandchildren of the "last aristocrat" Alec Douglas-Home, nor the children of middle England Mrs Thatcher. They are the children of successful barristers, merchant bankers, senior civil servants who attended the posh public schools and ancient universities. They are not from the prosperous provincial or "service" gentry. They are a new elite financed by The City and educated in the best schools. And they are politically savvy enough to hide the sneer.[8]

Outstanding examples of the aforesaid are David Cameron and Nick Clegg. For most of the twentieth century generations of Camerons have been stockbrokers at Panmure Gordon. Nicholas Clegg Sr is chairman of Unity Trust Bank of Haymarket in Mayfair. The family owns a chateau in France and a chalet in Switzerland. Their style is new. They do not articulate like Douglas Hurd nor do they put on the airs of being old elite. They are less conspicuous, less voluble but more formidable. They grew up in Global London, not in the Shires.

There are eighteen millionaires of the twenty-three permanent ministers in the current Cabinet. They have told us that "we are all in this together." But that was months ago. More recently, one Bank executive has told us that "the days of remorse are over." So, seat belts tightened. We are driving through a thick fog. There is a brick wall ahead constructed of the bricks and debris of our two most recent policy disasters: the Iraq War and the economic crisis. We know the wall is there, but we cannot see it and will not until impact.

Our society may well be living its era of apocalypse, or unveiling. Our politicians have revealed themselves as being unworthy of trust.[9] They respond to the interests of only certain sectors of our society and have very little inkling of what leading a people towards a good and just society means. Our bankers and financiers have shown no ethical awareness in the way they have played fast and loose with money not their own. Those who will pay are already paying in the form of cutbacks in the NHS, in the education sector and the services sector. The welfare budget will be cut by £18 billion. Charities are shutting down, choked by a lack of funding. The volunteer sector will shrink. Even those "part time shepherds", the lollipop ladies and men, will disappear in their thousands.

The neo-liberal model has imposed itself. The United States will continue to be the most powerful economy and will live beyond its means indebted to China, Japan and others who hold its Treasury bonds. China will overtake the US in manufacturing this year. Meanwhile, a communist China is abandoning its collectivist experience. India seems embarrassed by its archaic Gandhian communal foundations. We do not have an alternative economic model which can give birth to a social model which embraces the needs and aspirations of all those affected by the workings of the present model.

Toward the end of January every year more than two thousand political, economic and financial CEOs, gurus, titans and heads of state meet in Davos, Switzerland invited by the World Economic Forum. Each invitation costs \$71,000. That is just to get in the door. A fortnight later in Dakar, Senegal there was the meeting of the World Social Forum, attended by more than ten thousand concerned to live fuller, better and more just lives for themselves and for others.

## **Christians' Response**

What are we to think and do as Christians in today's globalised world? As Catholics we often have recourse to Catholic Social Teaching (CST). But this may not be enough. CST was born and matured in a context of menacing Communist revolution and Cold War. It presupposes the ongoing existence of the free market and its dynamics. CST criticises the ethos and the way things are done within the system. CST wants the system to function ethically, but it does not question the system itself.[10] We are now in a post-communist, post-national capitalist, post-christendom world. The global free market prevails and there does not seem to be an alternative. This poses a challenge to our creativity.

We live on the threshold of a new consciousness, a new awareness, a new awakening. The nineteenth century philosopher Nietzsche once exclaimed, "What? Almost 2000 years and no new god!" Our Faith is challenged to move us toward a new image of God which will somehow urge us to renew the face of the earth in the image of a loving God who promises life in abundance. We have left behind the biblical tribal deity Jehovah, the Pantocrator Imperial Christ of eastern Christianity and the patriarchal Father of western Christianity.

Our churches are shrinking and partially disappearing. They are striving principally for institutional survival, not so much for planetary or social renewal. That is a good thing for it will permit creative Christians to think outside of the institutional box without the obstructions placed by a clergy milling around on the decks of the ecclesiastic Titanic.

Those creative Christians will have found unexpected allies in the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. They have raised the God question in a context of scientific reasoning and religious extremism. Surprisingly we are talking about God again, debating and arguing about her, raising questions, wondering 'what if?' God, whom we don't do, is at the centre of public discourse, a hot topic of conversation, an 'agent provocateur'

of heated discussion. People like Tony Blair and Ann Widdecombe have been sucked into the vortex of debate and have lost. But we do not debate about the Church. And does anyone care?

The God we seek is not a Roman Catholic. God is not the Jehovah who ordered his people to genocidal violence. The God we seek is like unto the God who created the world and saw it was good. When it became evil God destroyed that world, regretted his fit of anger, and made a covenant with the survivors that she would sustain the earth she had made. When evil once again prevailed in the form of inhuman slavery God became Liberator and in the desert covenanted with his people that he would be their God and they his people.

Finally, God made a definitive covenant writ in the surrendered life of his son. The son, the risen Christ of God, sent the Spirit to his nascent community to announce a new creation and a new humanity. We want that Spirit to inspire us, urge us, guide us, unite us and create us anew. All this may have to happen outside of the institutional church which is in a different space and moment. We are bearers of that church's traditions and beliefs, its beautiful worship, its profound theology and its deep spirituality. But the institution is no longer able to provide to its most disquieted members the resources needed to nourish and sustain their spiritual journey.

Hence we see the decline in church membership and the increase of interest in spirituality, something that liberates from an asphyxiating institution whose women are choked by a clerical patriarchy, its children mauled by a few disempowered clergy, its creative thinkers and doers stifled by a rigid authority, its gays condemned by a biblical fundamentalism and all of us cowed into silence and deference by our own acquired, knee-jerk reflex to say "Yes".  
[\[11\]](#)

Our shared sense of God is that God wants a close intimate relationship with us and all of creation. That is what God Trinity is about, a community whose dynamic is a life-giving love. That God has loved us into life, all 6.9 billion of us. That God's centre is everywhere, especially in the hearts of every one of God's creatures, "where deep speaks unto deep". God's Eucharistic mission sending is *for* us. God sends us forth into her world. God is *in* us because we are in God and share in his life and thus in God's divinity. God is *with* us, walking, running, dancing, advancing towards the Reign of wholeness, peace, justice and fullness of life which God has planted like a seed deep in the soul and unconscious of each and every one of us. The seed's first fruit is the dream of a renewed creation common to each one of us.

## Final Thoughts

We follow Christ as the one who has given us his Spirit. It is a long journey to the fulfilment of his promise of life to the full. Our faith permits us a great and noble humanism because God became human in his son. Our humanism is born from the words of Jesus when he said he had come that all would have life in abundance. He did not come to found a new religion. Our humanism, therefore, is a hopeful one; but it is also tragic. That tragic humanism will force us to see the worst in ourselves. We have acted in our own humanity's self-centred interests in the way we have treated the Earth, gone to war, consumed more than a just share of the Earth's resources etc. That tragedy has become systemic, at the heart of who we are and what we do. We are the problem.

We have done a lot to reverse the system's inertia but it is not enough. We must look beyond the personal to the systemic. We need imaginative, creative groups and individuals, in touch with the local and with a wider scope and optic which are sensitive to the national and the global. We need a radical [\[12\]](#) self-examining critique of ourselves and of how our society 'dysfunctions'. The tragedy of the Arab peoples, the tragedy of Africa's starving masses; the tragedy of an Earth exploited as though it were an inexhaustible treasure trove, the tragedy of US imperialism and its lackeys will all mark our future. [\[13\]](#)

It would be easy to despair. But our love for our Earth and the poor of the Earth will not let us relent. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we state our firm hope that all creation—our hearts, minds and souls—will be transformed in the way that the food and drink on the altar, fruit of the earth and the work of human hands, are transformed into ourselves, the Body of Christ. We do feel that we are in the midst of an ongoing tragedy brought on by ourselves. Metanoia will come slowly and only God knows how it all will end. But beyond the tragedy we hear the words: "Courage. I have overcome the world."

Frank Regan

March 2011

---

[\[1\]](#) More than fifty percent of the populations of North Africa and the Middle East are under the age of 30. Unemployment among them hovers around 30-40%.

[\[2\]](#) In the last two years of economic uncertainty and crisis 440 million more people have descended into extreme poverty. The poverty line is \$1.25. A person whose daily income is below that figure is considered to be in extreme poverty.

[3] In Northern Africa and the Middle East there will be challenges regarding food security and water supplies. The water poverty line is 1000 cubic metres per person per year. Both Yemen, which imports 80% of its food, and Jordan are at the same water poverty level.

[4] For a fuller treatment refer to *The Failure of NeoLiberalism and the Despotism of Numbers: A Political and Theological Critique* by Michael S Northcott from Modern Believing, Jan 2011.

[5] Yes the people spoke and were heard on the sale of the forests—until next time? They also spoke some years ago on going to war in Iraq. We went anyway.

[6] Is it enough of a moral compass to rely on the 'efficiency' of markets and the 'rationality' of investors?

[7] It is important to remember that we did not vote for this Coalition.

[8] Cf *The Guardian Review*, 02/10/10

[9] I do not wish to demonise our politicians. There are many with a sense of vocation to service. But unfortunately they are neither leaders nor formers of opinion.

[10] CST may well be the Church's closest guarded secret but the fact is the Vatican and Dioceses across the world are intimately linked to the prevailing system. The Vatican owns its own international bank and has recently issued new regulations which bring the bank into conformity with European Bank regulations. What did it do before regulatory oversight?

[11] We need not think about leaving the church even though many feel alienated from the leadership. We do however need to think about what it will mean to be a Catholic in a church imploding and in a world exploding with crises of one form or another.

[12] Marx wrote that to be radical is to get to the root of the problem, and the root of the problem is Man—we would say Humanity. Note he did not say the class struggle, religion as opiate nor alienation.

[13] Five hundred years ago Bartolome de Las Casas wrote of a new Christendom of "Scourged Christs". The phrase raises the spectre which haunts our awareness of the world around us.