'Volunteerism in a post COVID society - lessons for church and society'

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Central to William Temple's thinking around a post-war social order back in 1942 was the role of religion (i.e., the Church) and the role of the (Christian) believer in the reconstruction of a social order in which the principles of Love and Justice are implicit, but nevertheless regulative (Temple, 78). In Temple's Christian social ethics, both policy and individual contributions to the social order need to be aligned to deep values, beliefs and principles in order to create an economic and social polity strong enough to withstand both the pressures of ideological capitalism and ideological totalitarianism. In this article, we take two of Temple's core policy constructs – responsible citizenship and intermediate groupings - to explore the extent to which they offer insights into our current post-pandemic context. The theme of volunteerism is important to consider in the light of the Beveridge report of 1942 since Beveridge himself addresses the theme in his Third report on Voluntary Action published in 1948, as a response to fears that the welfare state in some way might supercede or suppress the initiative of individual citizens to engage in social protection both for themselves, and their fellow citizens. Temple in many ways anticipates and addresses this concern in these two categories which we now consider in greater depth.

Drivers of participation: Intermediate Groupings and Responsible Citizenship

Temple always stressed that the alignment between beliefs and participation was not a given reality, but was rather a complex, often flawed, but ultimately pragmatic one. Within this complex arrangement, it was the role of the (Welfare) State to maximise the opportunities for this type of engagement through the support of 'intermediate groupings' by which we learn what it is to be human and valued through a recognition of the power of

relationships and the opportunity to participate for the mutual and interconnected good of all. In this model, the State, in Temple's memorable phrase, becomes 'the Community of Communities' (Temple, 71). The State maximises the conditions for intermediate groupings through the provision of the essential building blocks for a well-led and content life; namely lifelong education, decent housing, guarantees of freedom of speech and association, and a living wage.

The *quid pro quo* as far as Temple was concerned was for the individual citizen to reciprocate these opportunities for access to a more just, equal and participative life by exercising what he termed 'responsible citizenship'. This responsible citizenship had three levels. The first was to align, as far as possible, one's paid work with a sense of Christian vocation and service to wider humanity, not just narrow self-aggrandisement or financial or social standing. The second was to take an active role in political participation (including the exercise of one's civil rights (Temple, 43)) and to apply all the policies and promises of both the Left and the Right to the scrutiny of Christian conscience and God's will for the world and society. The third level relates to the wider mission of the Church to 'announce Christian principles and point out where the existing order at any time is in conflict with them' (Temple, 58). The Christian citizen must, in the light of these principles, 'act in their civic capacity' to 'reshape the existing order in close conformity to [those] principles' (Temple, 58).

Many Christians, indeed citizens from other faith traditions, as well as the increasing numbers of those who do not identify with any religious affiliation, will act in the public square (or squares) in accordance with a set of deeply-held beliefs, values and worldviews. We now analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this relationship between values

and participation, but to also consider wider social and cultural trends that were well-established before the pandemic, but which it has accelerated and accentuated. These trends can be seen in relation to the priorities and concerns of Millennials but also Generation Z cohorts (i.e., those born 1981-1996, and 1997-2012 respectively).

The pandemic: increases in volunteering and the return to the local

Emerging literatures exploring the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering broadly identify two developments relevant to this article. The first points to a statistical increase in volunteering, much of it spontaneous and locally based. A rapid literature review of COVID-19 volunteering in the UK (Mao et al., 2021) reports that over 4000 local groups have been formed in response to the pandemic, involving as many as three million participants. On a national level, the NHS volunteer responders scheme was overwhelmed when 750,000 people applied in the first four days.

The provision of food and medical prescriptions dominated the early days of the lockdown response, before addressing some of the emotional fallout of the pandemic later – in particular, loneliness and poor mental health caused by social isolation. Volunteer activities associated with these agendas included the provision of arts and crafts packs, telephone support, online social activities and dog walking as well as activities addressing other key areas such as employment, social benefits, domestic abuse and homelessness. Research highlights growth across all categories of volunteering including 'formal volunteering' (via pre-existing structures and organisations), 'social action volunteering' (i.e., fundraising and donations campaigns), and 'neighbourhood support' (i.e., providing support through actions such as shopping or cooking Christmas meals) (Mak and Fancourt, 2020).

The second development is the shift (back) towards 'the local' as the forum for people's engagement during the pandemic, and the mental health and wellbeing benefits that accrue to both volunteers and recipients through such engagement. The pandemic reminded everyone that your local community can be a vital source of support during a crisis, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'social cure' (Haslam et al. 2018). For example, neighbourhood proximity can generate shared interests and sense of common fate across different generations in times of crisis (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2015). Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies show that volunteering reduces depression and loneliness and increases the wellbeing of often vulnerable groups (Carlton, 2015). Helping others encourages perspective taking and personal reappraisal as well as providing increases in personal self-esteem and emotional regulation (Dore, Morris, Burr, Picard and Ochsnre 2017). In short, community identification serves to enhance and protect citizens' mental health and wellbeing by means of the mundane interactions of everyday life.

Values, values everywhere

Outside of the pandemic, the second trend driving the move towards volunteering and civic activism, is the experience of Millennials and Generation Z. A recent volume usefully unpacks the mindset and worldview of Generation Z (or Gen Zers or postmillennials), who are born after 1995 (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, Woodhead, 2021), and therefore born into an entirely digital age. For them, there is often a seamless and porous interaction between the digital world of social media and AI, and IRL (In Real Life). This is important because the digital world offers endless opportunities for self-expression and exploration of identities which can be granular and intersectional, but can also be updated. Fluidity and hyper-diversity are prized characteristics of postmillennials. The key element holding all these

disparate identities together is the notion of authenticity: being true to yourself and living your life in the way that you choose. As Katz et al. remark, 'This self-discovered identity is closely tied to another valued quality: authenticity. Gen Zers feel the need to be honest not hypocritical – especially (but not only) in relation to the ethnic and gendered communities with which they identify and therefore claim belonging.' (2021, 41)

Other important elements flow from this commitment to authenticity. First is the importance of values and beliefs. To tell the story of 'who I am', my values and beliefs are now an integral element of my story. I am the sum part of my authentic beliefs, and they help to explain not only who I am but also why I act like I act. This means that Gen Zers value notions of hospitality, tolerance, openness, empathy, respect and interconnectedness. These sets of values have been decried by some as the basis of 'snowflake' culture, a pejorative term that denotes an over-sensitivity to criticism or exposure to contradictory views.[1]

But as Katz et al. point out, the above values also have the potential to act as the ethical basis for a more progressive social and political agenda that can resonate more widely. These values can help join up disparate moments and individual proclivities into something more akin to an alternative movement of belonging and engagement. We should not forget that post-millennial attachment to these values is derived from a pervasive sense that theirs is the generation that will have to put right the current catastrophes being visited on the world, which they see as having originated from the selfishness and complacency of

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[1] For example, a web-based definition that captures the current zeitgeist around the term reads, '…"snowflake" is generally viewed as derogatory and refers to people who are entitled, genuinely distressed by ideas that run contrary to their worldview, and carry an inflated sense of their own uniqueness'. Addiction and Society: Snowflakes and a Culture of Outrage - Non 12 Step Drug Rehab and Alcohol Treatment (practicalrecovery.com)

previous generations (the so-called Ok Boomer syndrome). These catastrophes include climate emergency, growing authoritarianism, the rise in discrimination and prejudice and a profound uncertainty about the direction of the world in respect to 'where artificial intelligence may take humankind' (Katz et al., 124). In short, '…postmillennials … tend to be skeptical about institutions, [and] are largely disillusioned with what they have inherited from their elders and feel the burden to sort out the messed-up world they have inherited' (Katz et al., 124).

These predispositions are also framed within a widespread re-engagement with spirituality and re-enchantment as part of the quest for authenticity and re-connection to the earth, and which is often expressed in a revival of interest in indigenous cultures. This combination of attributes makes Gen Zers a potential source of ethically-motivated, pragmatic and intersectional volunteering and activism.

In previous contexts, I have referred to this desire to bring religious and non-religious beliefs and values in line with our actions as 'spiritual capital' (Baker and Skinner 2006). Spiritual capital is the 'why' that drives the 'what'. In the early 2000s, the William Temple Foundation undertook research into faith-based contributions to urban regeneration in marginalised post-industrial areas of Manchester (Baker and Skinner, 2006). Faith groups offered often exemplary 'round the clock' goods and services to the localities in which they were based. However, when it came to working in partnership with secular agencies such as local authorities, or applying for grant funding to run social care projects, they were not permitted to mention the faith-based dimensions and motivations for their work. The faith groups we engaged with spoke about their frustration of having to leave something that was intrinsic to their motivation, contribution and identity 'at the door' of meetings. This was

the first time I became aware of the injustice of being asked to 'edit out' something of your identity so as to be allowed to fully participate in a public and accountable process. Ever since then, I have been at the forefront of pointing out to policy makers that important issues such as urban development and the eradication of poverty and injustice must allow space for the inclusion of spiritual capital as an indispensable contribution to problem solving and engagement (Baker, Crisp and Dinham, 2019).

Subsequently, we have devised the notion of 'secular spiritual capital' to recognise the increasingly rich spiritual hinterland of those who define themselves as no-religion (as in affiliation to a religious tradition) but find themselves adopting a series of beliefs, values and worldviews that comfortably mix religious, spiritual and secular sources (Baker and Miles-Watson, 2008). The difference that Gen Zers bring to this debate is that beliefs and values are not simply *adopted*. Rather, they are *acted on* in very conscious and deliberate ways as a tangible and public testimony to personal authenticity and integrity. It is inconceivable that we would now construct public policy frameworks that would require people to 'edit out' their core values and beliefs, in ways that were expected of faith groups twenty years ago. Rather, today's younger citizens will expect them to be 'edited in' to any public process, both for themselves and others.

Lessons for church and society

In terms of the role of the church in a post-pandemic society, the emphasis must now be to go with the flow of providing spaces and leadership where people of all generations, but especially Millennials and postmillennials, can invest their pent-up demand for volunteering, and more closely align their lifestyles with their beliefs and values. This will require strong

but non-hubristic forms of public and civic leadership on the part of church leaders and laity that perhaps take Temple's articulation of responsible citizenship to a new level.

I have identified three dimensions of faith-based leadership and praxis which I think better fit into what we can broadly characterise as an increasingly post-Christian but also postsecular public square in the UK (Baker, 2020). The first includes *the right to interfere in the public debates that shape the sort of society we want to build, and the alternatives that need to be explored*. Temple in *Christianity and Social Order*, spends the first third of the book reclaiming the right of the church to interfere in conversations of national importance. This it does by stating in clear, accessible but unambiguous terms the wise and tested principles for peace, reconciliation and human and non-human flourishing that lie within theological and philosophical resources. Similarly, the days of trying to smuggle theology in on the back of empirical and policy-framed reports are now over. In a modern, diverse and postsecular world we expect from each other respectful but unvarnished interventions that are authentic to our own discourse and experience, but that 'land' in such a way that others can hear and understand, even if they don't agree.

Second, there is an imperative for the church to claim a space of political and civic leadership in the vacuum that often exists at the local level, where rates of trust or resource are low. This means for example, curating events and conversations that prompt new thinking and new questions that need to be asked. It is important that faith groups rediscover the art and confidence of civic leadership in ways that are strategic and proactive, rather than defensive and reactive.

Finally, the current conditions encourage us to *develop a form of faith-based leadership that is confident of its own positionality and right to speak, but is not hubristic, and above all can*

lead based on action and reputation. Faith groups often understand the critical issues that deform and hold back the flourishing of our communities because they are directly involved in standing in solidarity with those confronting these issues. Faith groups also have solutions to offer based on their practical experience of trying, often in partnership with others, to make a real and substantial change and improvement.

Reassessing Temple's thinking for a post-pandemic, values-driven public space

The policy and cultural assumptions in which Temple was writing are radically different to today: a general deferral to the wisdom of institutions and elites, and a trust in centralised planning being two examples of assumptions that are now much less powerful. And yet, striking parallels exist that align in uncanny ways. At the time of writing, the spectre of European armed conflict has fearfully resurrected itself in the attempts by Russia to co-opt Ukraine by brutal force into its sphere of influence. Authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies, amplified by social media, are once again on the march, threatening the stability of established democracies. In the meantime, the economic and social debate on how to 'build back' a better world in the light of a global pandemic and climate emergency rages on. It is now time to assess the extent to which Temple's policy ideas 'land' in these current contexts.

First, and as already discussed, Temple's notion of responsible citizenship seems to land well in a space where many are seeking to make a positive change in the world, based on and shaped by deeply held core beliefs, values and worldviews. However, the more normative dimensions of Christian service that Temple deploys under this category - the idea giving your life as a sacrifice in emulation of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross - need to be reframed. Responsible citizenship now needs to also be reconceived as a more authentic expression of

individualism, which nevertheless, in this borderless and hierarchically flatter digital age, lends itself well to being grafted onto larger gatherings based on affinity and shared concern and identity.

As Katz et al., point out, these affinity groups, co-existing effortlessly in both digital and IRL worlds, are a core component of post-millennial identity and *modus vivendi.* Part of the appeal of discovering your chosen (as opposed to genetic) 'fam' or 'squad' is not only to find a source of emotional solace, solidarity and support in an increasingly fragmented and polarised world. The appeal is also in finding others who are engaged in more political and spiritual forms of activism and volunteering that chime with your values and desires for authentic change.

The importance attached to finding your 'fam' or 'squad' refers back to a cornerstone of Temple's social policy we alluded to at the start of this article; namely his idea of intermediate groupings. For Temple, intermediate groupings exist between the level of the individual and the State and include a large spectrum of sizes ranging from the nuclear family through to 'the Church or congregation, professional association, the Trade Union, the school, the university, the Mutual improvement society' (p.70). For him, intermediate groupings are essential for democracy because it is in these spaces that we learn what real freedom to participate in public life involves. It is not freedom *from* the potentially unwarranted demands of others – so redolent of neo-liberal capitalist anthropologies of the self-directed consumer and autonomous individual. Rather, true participative democracy relies on the notion of freedom *for*; freedom based on the notion that we find our true sense of self-worth, dignity and personality when we allow ourselves to be there for others, and in some way, allow their needs and experience to have some claim on our own. In these

spaces, Temple asserts, we 'can feel as though we count for something and that others depend on us as we on them' (p.70). As outlined earlier, it is the role of the State to enable public life so that these intermediate groupings can flourish and expand, 'giving them freedom to guide their own activities…' (p.70).

Conclusion

The intermediate groupings that we now choose are miles apart in terms of their structures from those envisaged by Temple. His list represents the almost complete antithesis of those sources of wisdom and authority that Millennials and post-millennials trust. Temple's list is static and immutable – digital intermediate groupings are fluid and intersectional. But their function is arguably the same: namely spaces of engagement independent of the State (and sometimes the market) where we can potentially learn to develop the virtues and ethics of hospitality, tolerance and valuing and affirming the essential and unique dignity of each person, made in the image of God. In short, these new hybrid digital/IRL structures are the new social laboratories where we learn the art of responsible citizenship for the 21st century.

It is the role of the church, in a creative re-imagination of Temple's Christian social ethics, and for the good of the political, mental and civic resilience of a post-pandemic society, to encourage the development of IRL 'fams' and 'squads' which can sit alongside digital or virtual 'fams', and which can be fully plugged into the complex materialities of each locality via new structures of volunteering, activism and reflexive meaning making.

1) Is there still a role for Christian theological principles (as well as those from other philosophical sources) in the formation of policy, and if so, how should they best be mediated and acknowledged?

2) What are the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital to volunteering in locallities, and is the church well-equipped enough both theologically and practically to address them?

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