7. 'Building Back Better' and the search for values. Critically reclaiming Temple's social thought for a post-pandemic policy landscape.

Christopher Baker

Director of Research for the William Temple Foundation

William Temple Professor of Religion, Belief and Public Life, Goldsmiths, University of London

c.baker@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

This article moves beyond William Temple's *Christianity and Social Order* and gives an outline of its implications for public policy today in the context of religiously inspired terrorism, the global financial crash, COVID-19, and postsecularity.

Keywords

Temple, *Christianity and Social Order,* terrorism, global finance, financial crash, COVID-19, postsecularity.

Part of what we celebrate today is William Temple's genius in linking public policy to core Christian beliefs and values. For example, he made extensive use of the doctrines of Original Sin, Creation and Incarnation in his arguments for a post-war welfare state. He dared to believe, and indeed argue, amid a strongly secularised mid 20th century that theological and philosophical ideas should be in direct conversation with policy, because without them, one only deals with problems and solutions on a technical and empirical basis. One never goes upstream to contest and alter the course of the flow of ideas and assumptions that then assume the status of deadening and sometimes dangerous normativity.

I imagine Temple's social thought as a faithful, slightly battered radio transmitter - still sending out radio waves of ideas and thinking over the past 80 years. For long periods the pulse feels weak and intermittent – with lots of background hiss and noise that comes and goes as you travel the terrain. One could argue that the late 80s to the early 2000s was such a

period when the pulse of Temple's thinking was largely ignored or neglected. But then you turn a corner and suddenly the signal becomes clear again – the music and words are brighter and more insistent.

The thesis I now explore is that on the 80th anniversary of *Christianity and Social Order* we are turning such a corner now in terms of the current repositioning and juxtaposition of religion, belief, citizenship, activism and politics. Temple's invitation to go upstream and alter the flow of political and policy ideas using the resources of theological and philosophical thinking is therefore urgent and timely. I develop this thesis with respect to three lines of evidence.

Austerity, localism and the re-emergence of faith

First, policy interest and engagement in religion and belief has grown steadily since the millennium. Prior to then, religion as a source of wisdom, ideas, and practices, had been effectively disconnected from the public sphere, not least by the arrival of the post-war comprehensive and universal welfare state – delivered on primarily technocratic and secular lines - despite the profoundly theological ideas Temple had woven into its fabric.

However, the Islamist terror attack on New York on 9/11 rapidly shifted the dial. In the ensuing panic about religion, a slew of government and thinktank reports emerged in the early noughties, reminding policy makers and a startled wider public that faith groups were essential sources of motivation, delivery of goods and services to local communities, and generators of social capital, community cohesion and resilience. These reports had titles such as: Faiths Hope and Participation --'Faith' in Urban Regeneration? -- Faith as Social Capital – Connecting or Dividing. There was however widespread suspicion of proselytisation, and that faith groups had ulterior motives in offering social care and community development. Policy guidelines therefore insisted that any faith-based motivation (a motivational energy that I have described as 'spiritual capital' (Baker and Skinner, 2006)) was edited out of partnership discussions or funding proposals. Renewed interest in faith and religion was therefore largely instrumentalised, working on essentialised binaries of either very good religion or very bad religion. This tendency reached its nadir with the emergence of the Prevent agenda which inevitably stigmatised entire British Muslim communities and led to spikes in hate crime and Islamophobia.

Global financial crash and postsecularity

A second wave of interest followed the 2007/8 financial crash and the subsequent policies of austerity which lasted almost a decade across Europe and the UK. In 2011 John Atherton, John Reader and myself wrote a short book to mark the 70th anniversary of *Christianity and Social Order*. In it, we argued that a wary secular accommodation of religion and belief in the public square was giving way to a more naturalised welcoming of the role of faith within a liberal economic mixed package of delivery. This welcome was framed by marketisation of the benefits system and 'appeals (often morally couched) for local communities to get involved in bidding for social care contracts or building the capacity of "traditional" volunteering' (Atherton, Baker, and Reader 2011. 104).

Key to this new approach was the influential thinking of German social theorist Jurgen Habermas. He had observed the re-emergence of religion as a global geo-political force towards the end of the 20th century. He also recognised the extent to which religious ideas and wisdom were now required to help save the collapse of the European ideal of the liberal democratic nation state from its own neo-liberalism. Habermas proposed it was time for the West to move from a secular imagination of the public square in which the secular was neutral and public and religion private, to a postsecular one in which 'the vigorous continuation of religion in a continuously secularising environment must be reckoned with' (Habermas 2005.26). This conceptual move acknowledged the public square was made up of both religious and secular dispositions. It also opened the possibility of more porous and less binary and hierarchical understandings of the relationship between the religious, the spiritual and the secular. By the end of our book we were cautiously optimistic that these trends were signalling a deeper rapprochement between faith-based and secular institutions and individual actors, a proposition well captured by the following quote describing postsecularity as 'a coming together of citizens who might previously have been divided by differences in theological, political or moral principles – a willingness to work together to address crucial social issues in the city, and in doing so put aside other frameworks of difference involving faith and secularism' (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013. 28).

Pandemic partnerships and Generation Z

I believe we are on the cusp of an exciting third wave of religious and spiritual engagement which could take partnership and collaboration between the religious and secular to a new policy level. Two global drivers are contributing to this wave. The first has been the deep and intensive collaboration generated between some local authorities and faith groups in response

to COVID-19. Commissioned research for the APPG on Faith and Society approached all 408 local authorities across the UK during the first lockdown concluded that 67% of Local Authorities reported an increase in partnership working since the pandemic started. 91% said that their experience of pandemic partnership with faith groups/FBOs was 'Very Positive' or 'Mostly Positive' and 76% said they expected the partnership to continue on either current practices or on a more enhanced basis in the future (Baker/APPG Faith ad Society 2020).

A follow up report, to be published shortly, covering the second and third lockdowns involves 35 in-depth interviews with senior local authority and faith group leaders on the frontline of service delivery. It contains a commonly owned observation of the importance of sharing values of what really matters, and recognising that sharing these values increases the possibility of generating shared outcomes. As I have written in this report's conclusion:

> COVID-19 has heightened the need for a more authentic, participatory, and dynamic form of governance and decision making that is both pragmatic and flexible, but also more explicitly values-led. In a values-led economy outcomes are framed with perhaps unusual words, uncovered by this data, to describe the hallmarks of a good partnership between local authorities and faith groups; words such as kindness, empathy, compassion, motivation, hope and friendship. This possibly new and unfamiliar vocabulary or lexicon might nevertheless come more into the policy mainstream, as the UK attempts to build back better after COVID-19. (Baker/APPG Faith and Society, forthcoming)

The second driver for this third wave involves the cultural and political influence of the Millennial, but particularly Generation Z (or postmillennial) approach to identity formation and meaning making. Postmillennials, born after 1996 into an entirely digital age, enjoy often seamless interactions between the digital world and IRL (In Real Life). The digital world offers endless opportunities for self-expression and exploration of identities which can be granular, intersectional and continually updated. Fluidity and hyper-diversity are prized characteristics. The key element holding these disparate identities together is the notion of authenticity; being true to yourself and living your life in the way that you choose. Recent research suggests 'Gen Zers feel the need to be honest not hypocritical – especially in relation to the ethnic and gendered communities with which they identify and therefore claim belonging.' (Katz et al.,2021.41)

The importance postmillennials attach to values and beliefs flow from this commitment to authenticity. In telling the story of 'who I am', my values and beliefs are now an integral element of that story. I am the sum part of my authentic beliefs, and they help explain not only who I am but also why I act like I act. This means that Gen Zers expect and value notions of hospitality, tolerance, openness, empathy, respect and interconnectedness, both from themselves and in others.

The strong attachment to values also derives from a pervasive sense that theirs is the generation to put right the current catastrophes being visited on the world from the selfishness and complacency of previous generations. '…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). A widespread re-engagement with spirituality and re-enchantment is a strong element of the quest for authenticity and re-connection, and is often expressed in a revival of interest in indigenous cultures.

Building back better in a post-pandemic *zeitgeist* for the social order

So where, and how, does Temple's social thought fit into this fluid, values-rich and postsecular landscape? Any critical reclaiming of Temple's social thought starts with acknowledging the profound shift in cultural context between his era and our own. He writes from a highly secularised context where there is, however, enough residual belief in the efficacy of hierarchies, institutions and elites to ensure that his voice resonates into the political and policy space.

Ironically the current postsecular *zeitgeist* is more confused and wary of its secular legacy. It is more suggestive to propositions about the efficacy of religion, belief and spirituality because of their perceived links to the search for authenticity and re-enchantment so prized by millennial and postmillennial experience. The downside is that the institutions, hierarchies and elites that Temple appeals to in his thinking are the very antithesis of those that postmillennials aspire to. One glaring example of this paradox is Temple's thinking on intermediate or associational groupings.

Intermediate groupings are spaces located between the individual and the State where we learn to be relational and participate in civic life and politics, and where we experience and perhaps learn to respect the innate dignity of every human made in God's image. It is in these

spaces that we potentially learn that true participative democracy relies on the notion of freedom *for* rather than *from* others; i.e., 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 intermediate groups, Temple asserts we 'can feel as though we count for something and that others depend on us as we on them', and his examples range from the nuclear family through to 'the Church or congregation, professional association, the Trade Union, the school, the university, the Mutual Improvement Society' (Temple 1976.70).

Unfortunately these institutional and hierarchical forms of belonging tend to affront postmillennial aspiration. For example, one's family (or 'fam') is based on a sense of authentic affinity not genetics. These fams are fluid and flexible, heterogenous rather than homogenous – hierarchically flat rather than hierarchically stacked. And yet early evidence suggests that they do fulfil some of Temple's vision for intermediate groups. They mediate the space between the individual and the State (and sometimes the Market). They are spaces where we learn to relate to others who are different and do so on the potential basis of hospitality and openness to otherness and difference. We can use these spaces to explore and reimagine our sense of intertwined fates and the desire to reconnect to each other and Nature as an antidote to the pervasive loneliness and fragmentation of a neo-liberalised modernity, the roots of which the pandemic has so ruthlessly exposed.

There may well be other strong resonances between Temple's thought and our online and offline public spaces, now shaped by the pandemic, and a new war in Europe. The same hermeneutical rigour of context would need to be applied; but, for example, how might Temple's derivative principles of freedom, fellowship and service as the basis of a just and inclusive social order now 'land' in today's fluid and anxious world, desperately seeking reconnection to deeper values and principles.

If Temple was writing *Christianity and Social Order* now, I doubt he'd spend a third of it justifying why the church should interfere. Instead, I suspect he would use that space to encourage the church to model confident but non-hubristic leadership by curating spaces of authentic activism, volunteering and belonging. Here, shared values of offering hospitality, welcoming diversity and exploring authenticity and spiritual re-enchantment can be re-discovered and reflected on through shared conversations and actions.

In short this is what 'building back better' looks like.