

WHERE IS SOCIETY HEADING?

1. SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Society is more than the sum total of its individual citizens. We are all members of institutions and social structures that to a greater or lesser extent influence how we interpret and respond to our experiences. For example our families, schools, peer groups and the mass media may all have played a part in shaping our attitudes and values when we were growing up. Parents who want their children to attend faith-based schools are recognising this. Similarly, those who advocate the restoration of national service do so because they believe that a period of military service would change the way young adults behave. Conversely, prisons are seen to be academies of crime that turn first-time offenders into hardened criminals. This is not to say that we have no choice in, and responsibility for, what we think and how we behave, but it is to recognise that we do not live in a vacuum and we are all susceptible to influence by our social environment. At the same time, we may influence others for good or ill.

The Bible portrays humans as social beings who need each other to be whole and fulfilled. It reveals God as three persons in perfect community. (See Matthew 3:16-17 and Ephesians 1:3-14.) The significance of this becomes clear when we read that human beings were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). Part of what that means is that we are social beings with a capacity for forming personal relationships, both with God and each other. God looked at Adam and observed that it was not good for the man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Although the image of God in human beings was distorted by the Fall (Genesis 3), we note that it is still mentioned in Genesis 5. Even in the Fall there is still a sense of community: we are all one in Adam, all alienated from God and needful of a Saviour.

None of this diminishes the value and significance of individuals but it does suggest that from a creation perspective the individual is not complete in him or herself. We see the outworking of this in the story of Israel. The importance of community and the nation is evident as early as Genesis 10 and spelled out in Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The OT law required God's people to care for their neighbours and Ruth is a lovely example of this. The Prophets condemned Israel's neglect of the poor (For example, Amos 8:4-6; Isaiah 1:23; 3:15.) So community and society are important in a biblical worldview but in God's eyes what matters is whether or not they honour and obey him.

The New Testament follows the same line. Even though the central theme of the Gospel is about individuals being born again into a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ, those individuals are born again into a community of the redeemed. (See Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37) But the community of believers is not meant to be a closed ghetto. The parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) and of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) and Jesus' injunction that his disciples should love their neighbours and render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:15-22) make this clear. God's people should be a community but also be active in the wider society in his service. The metaphors of salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) and of yeast (Matthew 13:33) express the sort of influence Jesus wanted his disciples to have in society. This includes making more disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)

and being agents for change, slowing down moral decay and pushing back the frontiers of darkness in society. To that end St Paul taught the need to “conform no longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2; see also 2Corinthians 10:3-5). We are not only to be concerned about our own spiritual condition but also the spiritual climate of our community and nation. There is no room in the New Testament for a sacred-secular dualism. Those in authority are God’s servants (Romans 13:1-7) for whom we should pray (1Timothy 2:1-2).

2. WHERE IS SOCIETY HEADING?

It is not difficult to find evidence to support the proposition that our society is not only changing rapidly but also that it is turning away from God. Declining church attendance statistics, changing attitudes, behaviour and public policies that seem to fly in the face of biblical teaching come readily to mind. Yet at times of crisis such as the death of Princess Diana and the events of 11th September 2001, we also see evidence of many people expressing a deep spiritual hunger not satisfied by the churches. Where is our society going and what is our response? Social scientists point to four ways in which British culture is changing.

- First, it is becoming more individualistic. One third of London households are single person households and in the City of London more than 57% are in this category. More significant than such statistics are the self-orientated attitudes that go with individualism. Whether the focus is on work, shopping, relationships or even religion, the dominant attitude is that “it must fit me”, because self-fulfilment is what matters most in our culture.¹ (See above for Bible references to humans made in God’s image for interdependence and community.)
- Closely related is consumerism. The exaltation of the individual is experienced most blatantly in the shopping malls that have been described as the cathedrals of our consumerist age. The individual must be free to choose; we are told, so there must be a wide range of products from which to choose. It does not matter that famine is still a real issue in Africa; *we* must have dozens of different breakfast cereals to choose between. “In the post-modern world, heaven is a vast supermarket; hell is a corner shop stocking only one brand of aspirin or toilet paper, or more significantly, only one brand of religion, morality or marriage”. (Rodney Clapp) (See, for example, Matthew 6:25-34; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-31; Ephesians 2:3.)
- It is but a short step from individualism to relativism. There is no longer a place for absolutes; everyone does what is right in their own eyes. (See Judges 21:25) The consequence of this is that the old moral consensus, which was rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage, is disintegrating. We see this in the statistics for family breakdown (48%), single parent families (20%), cohabitation outside marriage (51%) and births outside wedlock (46%). The result is that one child in two under the age of 16 will experience the traumas of family breakdown. Patricia Morgan of the Institute of Economic Affairs has noted that none of these phenomena is new. “The only difference now is that today’s family forms are yesterday’s immoralities. What is new is the scale on which they are occurring and the claim

that these trends are nothing to worry about”.ⁱⁱ (See, for example, Exodus 20:1-17; Romans 8:1-17; 1Corinthians 1; 18-25; 2Corinthians 10:3-11)

- Relativism spawns pluralism. A relativist culture allows no one to claim that his or her way is the only way. Post-modern tolerance allows everyone to believe whatever he or she chooses so long as they keep it to themselves. This leads to the privatisation of faith. Religion belongs in the private sphere but not the public square. Those campaigning for the abolition of religious education and religious assemblies do so on these grounds. It is the justification given by some local authorities for not funding Christian projects from the public purse. Pluralism also lies behind calls for the renaming of December 25 as ‘Winterval’ rather than Christmas.ⁱⁱⁱ Carried to its logical conclusion pluralism means the outlawing of all attempts to evangelise people of other faiths. (See, for example, John 1:4; 10:9; 14:6-7; Acts 4:12.)

3. WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE?

- To understand the times like the men of Issachar (1Chronicles 12:32). To be informed about cultural trends and to understand their spiritual significance. Church groups reading new books, seeing new films etc. and evaluating them from a biblical perspective will help to do this.
- There are features of contemporary culture of which we will be critical. These include what has happened to the family, the erosion of community, and the loss of a moral consensus, the decline in church attendance and the resurgence of paganism. Other developments we may welcome. The post-modern critique of rationalism disposes of one of the churches’ most vigorous opponents. Society is now more caring and inclusive of people with disabilities. Even church decline means that a higher proportion of church attendees are now committed. Even so, when the pros and cons are weighed, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that British culture and society is heading in the wrong direction, away from God.
- There are three possible responses: to accommodate to these trends, to retreat from them into a religious ghetto, or to engage in a counter cultural movement. Accommodation and retreat are not options for Christians committed to the service of the Kingdom of God. John Stott’s exposition of the salt and light metaphors in Matthew 5:13-16 helps us to see that.^{iv} Jesus called his disciples to be different from the world, as different as light is from the dark. Indeed, the consistent message of the entire Bible is that God’s people are to be holy, set apart for his service. What Jesus adds is the calling for God’s people to penetrate society like salt rubbed into fish or meat as a preservative, to slow down decay and give them flavour. We have to be different and remain different from the world in order to make a difference in it. Those who accommodate a God-free culture are not different and those who retreat into a ghetto are not making a difference in society.
- One way of thinking about counter cultural engagement sees society as a marching column.^v The social leaders and opinion formers at the front of the column are leading us in the wrong direction, towards the moral and spiritual abyss. Rather than breaking away to find a safe spiritual ghetto, mission-

orientated Christians remain in the column but call out prophetically to those around us that society (the column) is heading in the wrong direction and needs to wheel towards the spiritual high ground, taking as many as possible with us. Just as Jesus took human form to reach us for God, he calls us to engage with our culture to show God's ways to our contemporaries, so that they might know him too and live in the way he intended.

- In practice this means bringing a Christian, biblical perspective to bear on everything with which we are involved. It starts at home in the priority we give to our family and the values we practice there.^{vi} It goes to work with us and shapes what we do as well as the way in which we do it.^{vii} It influences our relationships, guides our decision-making and priorities, causes us to rethink our voting behaviour and take recreation seriously. The goal is a lifestyle that reveals our relationship with Jesus Christ like the lettering running through a stick of rock. It is an active discipleship that recognises no boundaries beyond which our Christian faith and values cease to be relevant. It is a lifestyle that depends on regular prayer, Bible study and worship to preserve its integrity and spiritual vitality.
- An authentic Christian lifestyle is essential to mission in a post-modern society. How do people choose which values and lifestyle to adopt if every option is considered as valid as any other? The claim that our Maker's way works best needs convincing demonstration or it will be dismissed as arrogant rhetoric. But whilst the witness of individual lifestyles is an essential prerequisite for achieving a transformational impact it is not enough because few individuals can change whole societies. Even exceptional individuals, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, achieved what they did because they inspired and led popular movements. So individual Christians, churches and para-church organisations need to work in partnership to persuade our society that it is heading in the wrong direction and Godly values point to a better way.
- Whilst our personal choices and witness are an essential element of our response, so too must be a social and political element. Our Christian, biblical values and priorities have to shape how we vote in elections and the single issue campaigns we support if we are to help pull our country back to a Godly direction.

ⁱ Changing World, Changing Church,

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^{iv} The Christian Counter-Culture

^v One Body in Christ

^{vi} Families at the Crossroads

^{vii} Supporting Christians at Work

Michael Moynagh

Patricia Morgan

JRW Stott

I. Randall & D. Hilborn

Rodney Clapp

Mark Greene

Monarch 2001

Daily Telegraph

IVP 1978

Paternoster 2001

IVP 1993

Administry 2001