



The  
Children's  
Society



# The Heart of the Kingdom

Christian theology and children  
who live in poverty

Edited by Angus Ritchie



THE  
CONTEXTUAL  
THEOLOGY  
CENTRE

# Preface

Tim Thornton

This collection of essays is an invitation.

It is an invitation to the church to join with The Children's Society in a process of theological reflection that will challenge how we understand and respond – both practically and prayerfully – to the issue of child poverty in the UK. It is certainly not an attempt by The Children's Society to articulate a theology on behalf of the church, or even to suggest that we know what the theological answers are. It is simply an invitation for others to join us in a conversation that we hope will help us all see the issue more clearly.

The origins of this collection lie in a consultation at St George's House in Windsor, hosted by The Children's Society in 2011 in collaboration with the Contextual Theology Centre, where we began to outline what a theological response to child poverty might encompass. It has continued through numerous conversations and a roundtable where we have tried to listen to diverse voices within the wider church in the UK.

Over the course of its gestation, the topic of this collection of essays has become more and more relevant, its urgency only increasing as it has become clear not only that the government would fail to achieve its targets for the reduction of child poverty, but also that levels of child poverty are rising and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

In this context much of the public debate has fallen into practical issues about definitions of child poverty or divisive political splits between right and left over whether irresponsible parents or reduced levels of welfare spending are more to blame. What has been less in evidence in the public debate is a vision of what we as a society want for our children and what, in light of that vision, are the vocations of families, churches and the state. For the church, these more profound questions are properly the territory of theology, and we hope this collection will prove to be a useful place to start in discerning some of those theological answers and filling in a space in the public rhetoric.

In reading these essays I invite you to join in the theological debate and in particular I would encourage you to consider the place of hope, a theological virtue in which we are all invited to live and yet often and increasingly seems to be in short supply.

Each of the essays in this collection represents the views of its author or authors and not necessarily the views of The Children's Society. We offer them in the hope that they will start a conversation that will ultimately inform our practical work with children, our campaigning and advocacy, and our prayer and liturgical resources.

We would like you to be a part of that conversation.

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# Introduction

Angus Ritchie

Jesus places children and the poor at the heart of the Kingdom of God. He tells us that when we offer hospitality and care to children and those who lack food or shelter, we are welcoming and caring for him (Matthew 18:5, 25.34–40). Indeed, he teaches that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor, and that we can only enter it when we ‘become like children’ (Matthew 18:1-3, Luke 6:20).

For all the economic difficulties of recent years, Britain remains one of the most prosperous nations on earth. Our persistent failure to translate this national wealth into well-being for our children is a spiritual and moral scandal. It reveals something deeply troubling about our hearts and our priorities – and how far our earthly kingdom remains from the Kingdom of God.

*The Heart of the Kingdom* has been written to help Christians address the issue of child poverty. The collection is divided into three parts:

1. The first section describes the current context, and in particular the way children and young people experience poverty. These essays leave us in no doubt about the seriousness of the current situation and the yawning gap between political rhetoric about ‘compassion’ and ‘social justice’, and the lives of many British children.
2. The second section offers a series of theological reflections. The authors draw on a wide range of Christian traditions, from evangelical Protestantism to Catholic Social Teaching. They explore the ways in which churches are called to respond to child poverty and relate this to the complementary vocations of family, community and government.

3. The final part of the collection consists of two practical responses, one very local (through the lens of a parish in east London) and one national (from the Chief Executive of The Children’s Society). They are offered as part of the invitation to readers to join an ongoing process of reflection and action – helping each of us consider our response to the theology and testimony presented in the preceding essays.

I am grateful to all who have been part of the process of discussion and reflection that has led to this collection – and in particular to the authors of these essays, to my other colleagues at the Contextual Theology Centre (especially Caitlin Burbridge and Josh Harris), to Nigel Varndell, Lily Caprani, Sam Royston and Kate Tuckett at The Children’s Society and to Anthony Clarke, Sue Coleman and Paul Regan who have offered very helpful advice.

All too often, theology has been seen as a purely academic discipline; the preserve of a small elite of privileged experts with little practical relevance. Theology which is faithful to the Gospel could hardly be more different. The purpose of this book, as of all such theology, is not merely to inform. It is to help each of God’s children to share more deeply in his life and love.

The Feast of the Divine Compassion,  
7 June 2013

# Part 1:

# Testimony



Children are not simply to be understood and valued as adults-to-be. Their childhood is of value in its own right, and it offers us a unique and crucial window onto the Kingdom of God. For this reason, our collection of essays begins with an essay by Tess Ridge, whose research gives voice to children and young people, as they describe the experience of living with poverty. Jonathan Bradshaw demonstrates that child poverty also has a profound impact on their future life chances. Indeed, his contribution shows how child poverty impoverishes us all – economically as well as spiritually.

The final essay in the section, like the others, seeks to bring children's poverty more fully into the public eye, and to challenge the growing tendency to stigmatise and stereotype those in greatest need. The poverty of children in migrant and refugee families is often the most hidden. It is crowded out by an increasingly shrill and intense media narrative about 'scroungers' and 'benefit tourists'. Ilona Pinter speaks to us of a reality which is radically at odds with this narrative. She demonstrates how far the treatment of families seeking sanctuary in Britain falls short of the biblical vision of hospitality to the 'stranger' who is in need. In doing so, she begins to address the question that all three essays raise: What is a faithful and effective Christian response to the suffering of children who live in poverty?

# Poverty and the experience of children

Tess Ridge

In this short essay, I want to share with you findings from my research - conducted over a number of years with children and young people who were living in low-income families in the UK. In consequence, all of the effects of poverty shared in this paper are based on children's own accounts of their lives and of the issues that concern them. My research, and that of others in the field, shows that the impact of poverty can be felt across all areas of children's lives, affecting their economic well-being, their mental and physical health, their social relationships and the opportunities and choices open to them. A recent review of 10 years of research with low-income children found that:

**'...the experience of poverty in childhood can be highly damaging and the effects of poverty are both pervasive and disruptive. Poverty permeates every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantages, through social and relational constraints and exclusions, to the personal and more hidden aspects of poverty associated with shame, sadness and the fear of difference and stigma.'**<sup>1</sup>

If we look at each of these in turn, it is possible to get some sense of the everyday challenges that face children at school, at home and in their neighbourhoods. To be impoverished in an essentially affluent society is a very particular and stigmatised experience and children are very well aware of this.

## Money and 'going without'

Children experience the realities of their economic world within their families, but they are also exposed to different economic realities through interactions with their peers and through their engagement with the wider world and the media. For children in low-income families, financial resources and material goods are in short supply. Children are extremely anxious about the adequacy of income coming in to their homes and whether there is enough for them and their family's needs. They also often lack important childhood possessions, like toys, bicycles and games. When toys and bikes break, they stay broken and are not replaced. Poverty in childhood also brings a lack of everyday items that we take for granted, like food, towels, bedding and clothing. Children in urban areas can experience run-down, degraded and degrading environments that are poorly served by services, shops and public transport. However, low-income children in rural areas can equally find themselves isolated and marginalised within their small villages and towns, and experience a severe lack of social opportunities and activities, compounded by expensive and inadequate public transport.<sup>2</sup>

Children who are poor experience great uncertainty about whether or not they are able to gain access to sufficient funds to go out with their friends and share in their activities. Childhood has its own social and cultural demands, and the need to stay connected with peer-group trends and fashions is a significant social issue for children. Most low-income children do not receive any regular pocket money, so paid work is often the answer, working at part-time jobs between school hours and at weekends. Many children show great resourcefulness in accessing work and attempting to alleviate their disadvantage; they also show considerable understanding of their family's financial situation. In some



families, children help out directly with money or contribute towards their own needs. However, paid work is often in tension with school work, and money gained is rarely sufficient to sustain them adequately in the accepted culture of their peers. So many children just 'go without', moderating their needs to ensure that they do not put pressure on their families.

**'Well I don't like asking Mum for money that much so I try not to. Just don't really ask about it. It's not that I'm scared it's just that I feel bad for wanting it. I don't know, sounds stupid, but, like sometimes I save up my school dinner money and I don't eat at school and then I can save it up and have more money. Don't tell her that!'** Courtney<sup>3</sup>

## Friendships and social networks

Friendships are important for children, not just in terms of the growth and development of social skills and social identity, but also in learning to understand and accept others. Low-income children, like others, really value friends; they play an important role in safeguarding children from isolation and bullying. But many low-income children have been bullied at some point and this can have a marked effect on how they feel about their schools and in some cases, about themselves. As well as the fears and realities of experiencing bullying, many children experience difficulties in making and sustaining friendships. Transport costs and participation costs all conspire to leave children feeling excluded from many of the social and leisure experiences that their more affluent peers take for granted. Reciprocity is damaged; if you have very little home space, a cold and/or damp home, or no private transport, it is difficult to enter into sharing lifts and sleepovers, for example. Simple things that adults may not perceive as important often affect children's relationships, such as clothing expectations and taking part in shared leisure activities. Having the right clothes is an important badge of belonging and children often express a high degree of anxiety about maintaining their social status against the perils of being seen as different or 'poor'.

**'You can't do as much and I don't like my clothes and that. So I don't really get to do much or do stuff like my friends are doing... I'm worried about what people will think of me, like they think I am sad [pathetic] or something.'** Nicole<sup>4</sup>

Given children's evident fears of experiencing stigma and difference associated with poverty and disadvantage, the significance of opportunities to develop and keep strong and supportive social networks is clear.

## Children's social lives at school

School is important for children academically but also socially. It is within the school environment that children meet with a wider and more diverse group of their peers than they would in their home and neighbourhoods. But children's accounts of their school lives indicate that they experience considerable disadvantage within their schools, with many reporting feeling bullied, isolated and left out of activities and opportunities at school. Their fears about being seen as different and being left out are made worse by the knowledge that other children are doing more and having more, creating insecurity and uncertainty for some children.

**'They go into town and go swimming and that, and they play football and they go to other places and I can't go... because some of them cost money and that.'** Martin<sup>5</sup>

Children like Martin tend to exclude themselves from school activities. Disillusioned with the process, they do not take the letters home which ask for money for school trips and other activities because they know their parents would not be able to afford them. Other factors within schools also act to compound the economic and social disadvantages that children experience. Economic barriers, such as fees for school trips and the costs of academic materials, are made worse by institutional processes: demanding examination criteria, an insistence on school uniforms, deadlines for payments towards extracurricular school trips and activities that give little leeway for parents who cannot pay on time. There are also



meetings after school with no transport home and stigmatising bureaucratic processes in the qualification and delivery of welfare support, such as free school meals. So what low-income children identify – when we listen to them – are not the dangers of being excluded from school but rather the dangers of being excluded *within* school.

### Life at home with family and friends

In talking about their lives at home and in their communities, children often highlight their inner worries and their fears of social difference and stigma. Their experiences of poverty affect their self-esteem, confidence and personal security. These are difficult areas for children to reflect on, as difficulties with friendships and worries about social acceptance can be particularly hard for children to articulate. However, children are keenly aware of the impact of poverty on their lives and on the lives of their parents.

*'I worry about my mum and if she's like unhappy and stuff like that. Sometimes I worry about if we haven't got enough money. I worry about that.'* Carrie<sup>6</sup>

Children's fears of social detachment and social difference are very real, and they are often acutely sensitive to the dangers of being excluded from the activities of their friends and social groups. They are also uncertain and fearful about their futures, and these are difficult burdens to carry in childhood.

*'I worry about what life will be like when I'm older because I'm kind of scared of growing older, but if you know what is in front of you then it's a bit better, but I don't know.'* Kim<sup>7</sup>

Children are clearly struggling to protect their parents from the realities of the social and emotional costs of childhood poverty on their lives. This can take many forms: self-denial of needs and wants, moderation of demands and self-exclusion from social activities, school

trips and activities. In some cases parents may be aware of their children's strategies and reluctantly accept them in the face of severely constrained alternatives. In others children are regulating their needs more covertly.

### Final thoughts

Our understanding and perceptions of children who are poor are often ill-informed and stereotyped. Children's lives are very diverse, and poor children are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences of poverty will be mediated by many other factors including gender, disability, ethnicity and age. Children in different circumstances will have their own experiences and concerns to relate, and their own perceptions of how poverty has affected their lives. For many children, poverty comes into their lives close on the heels of other difficult and often painful situations. This could be the onset of sickness and disability, unemployment, family dissolution, asylum seeking, upheaval and change. This means that the experience of poverty is closely entwined with other difficult life events that children have to mediate, make sense of and negotiate. But it is clear from talking with children that they actively engage with their life circumstances, developing ways and means of participating where and when they can through work and play. The personal and social repercussions of poverty for children are often overlooked and easily disregarded, especially when policy concerns are focused on other (perhaps more tangible) concerns such as children's school attendance and performance, their health and their future employability as adults. But being seen as a 'poor' child in an affluent society, where poverty is associated with stigma and shame, can be a painful and damaging experience. Low-income children are not passive victims of poverty; they are struggling to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the cultural demands of childhood, but it is a struggle that is defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives.

# The impact of child poverty on future life chances

Jonathan Bradshaw

## Introduction

A major criticism of past research on child poverty is that it has focused too much on well-becoming rather than well-being – on the impact of poverty on life in adulthood rather than in childhood. So I would have preferred to have been asked to write the previous essay rather than this one – that is to write (again) about the impact of child poverty on well-being in childhood!<sup>8</sup>

From both the perspective of theology and of contemporary human rights discourse, the well-being of children during their childhood is what really matters. Children are often called the ‘church of tomorrow’ – but in fact, they are of course part of the church of today, and as such the wider community has a duty of nurture and care. Children have rights as children, not just as adults-to-be, and this is rightly the focus of the UN Charter on the Rights of a Child.

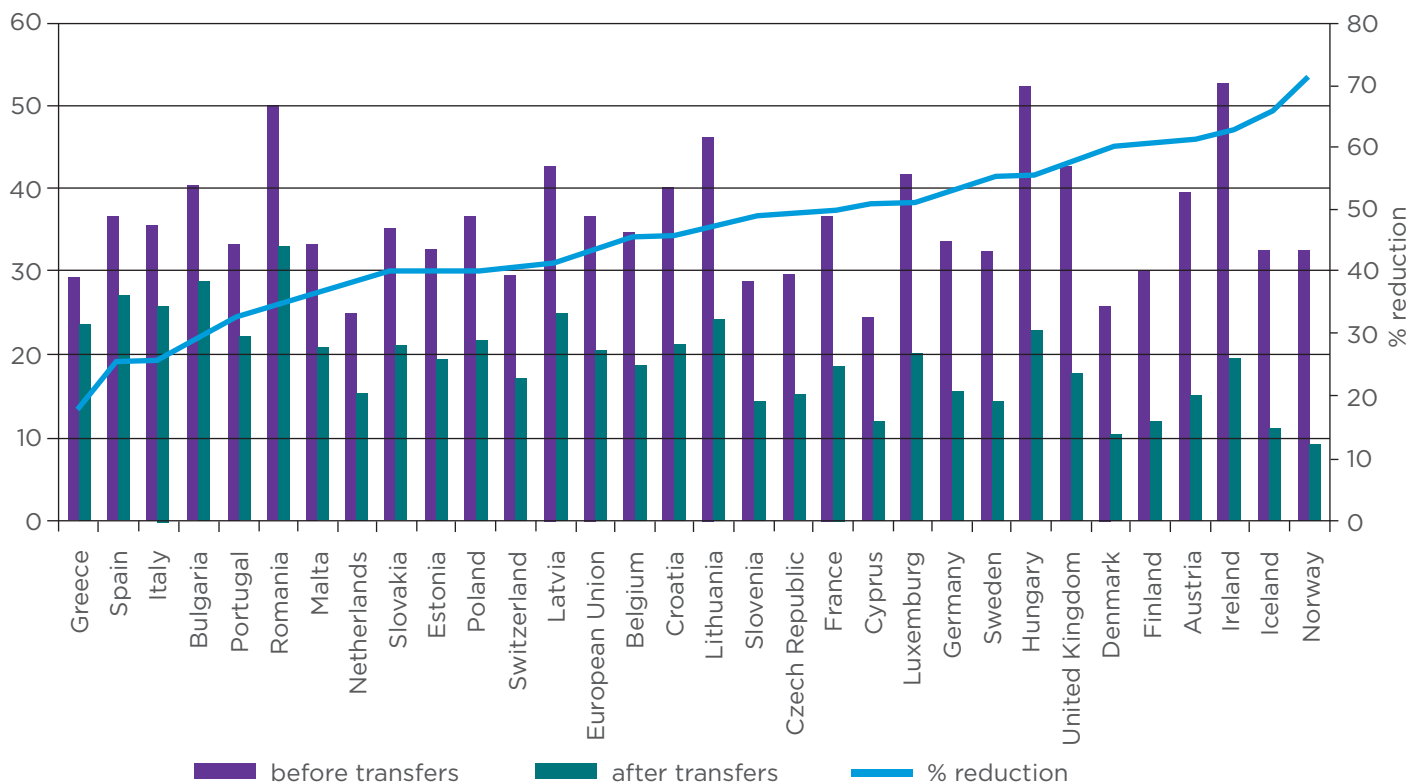
Yet the impact of poverty in childhood on future life chances is important from a social and economic perspective (in addition to the theological arguments) in three main ways.

1. If poverty in childhood leads to a less healthy, productive and happy adulthood, this is an *additional* reason for dealing with the injustice of child poverty. It is another reason why poverty is not fair for the individual.
2. If poverty in childhood is associated with poor outcomes in adulthood, it harms us all. Or rather – if we can convince tax payers that it is not good *for them* to allow child poverty to continue, we have a greater chance of tackling it in childhood.

3. Connected to this, it may be that many of the problems of society – ill-health, low skills, crime, squalor, unhappiness – are so closely associated with child poverty that it is really no good tackling them directly by, for example, spending more on health services, improving schools and colleges, or increasing spending on crime prevention. The best way to tackle these problems is through tackling the underlying cause: child poverty.

Governments already accept these arguments and take action. Indeed this is why child poverty is such a salient preoccupation of social policy analysts – it is the best indicator we have of government failure. Of course governments act with more or less success. Figure 1 shows what the child poverty rates in EU countries would be without any transfers from the government, and what the child poverty rates are after transfers are made. The countries are ranked by the impact of transfers. Thus Greece reduces its pre-transfer child poverty by 18%. The UK does not do too badly, reducing its own by 58%. But we are not nearly as effective as Norway, which reduces child poverty by 71%.

**Figure 1: League table of child poverty (<60% median threshold) reduction in the EU 2011<sup>9</sup>**



So what do we know about the impact of child poverty on future life chances? There is a vast literature which has fairly recently been reviewed by Griggs and Walker.<sup>10</sup> Their review covered:

- **Health:** The impact of poverty on health during the antenatal period, birth and infancy is profound. This is the period of foetal development that has great significance for later health, cognitive development, educational attainment and thus employment and earnings potential. There is evidence that poverty is associated with lower rates of breast-feeding, earlier births, low birth-weight, and higher rates of mortality, morbidity and maternal depression. These have knock-on effects in childhood health: poverty is associated with school absences due to infectious illnesses, obesity, anaemia, diabetes, asthma, poor dental health, higher rates of accidents and accidental deaths, and physical abuse. Poor children also have less access to health services. Poverty is associated with poor and overcrowded housing conditions with poor health

outcomes. Poverty is also associated with poor health behaviours, especially higher rates of maternal smoking. It is also strongly associated with poor mental health. These health experiences in childhood lead to poor health outcomes in adulthood and old age, including the worst levels of cardio-vascular problems, diabetes and heart disease. Hirsch<sup>11</sup> has estimated the health costs of child poverty in the UK to be £500 million per year.

- **Education:** There is a large body of evidence linking poverty to poor educational outcomes, much of it associated with difficulties in cognitive development in infancy. But other factors include limited access to high-quality pre-school provision, the poverty of schools in deprived areas, and economic constraints on participating in school activities. Children on free school meals are less likely to meet Key Stage standards and achieve five or more good GCSEs, to stay on at school or enter tertiary education. Low levels of skill achievement has a knock-on effect in employment,

resulting in high levels of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and long-term unemployment – which in turn is associated with crime and substance abuse. The life-time costs of NEET have been estimated at £15 billion (£7 billion in resource costs and £8.1 billion in public finance costs).<sup>12</sup> Special educational provision also costs £3.6 billion per year.

- **Employment:** There is a strong relationship between growing up in poverty and labour market participation and progress. The relationship between poverty and worklessness persists even if education is controlled for. Lower educational attainment is associated with low skills and thus lower paid jobs. Unemployment is inefficient, resulting in lost productivity and tax, and extra benefit payments.

The Griggs and Walker review went on to include a discussion of the impact of child poverty on behaviour, family and personal relationships, and subjective well-being. There is much debate about the association of poverty and many outcomes. Does child poverty cause crime? There is evidence from the USA that it does, but little evidence in the UK. Early parenting is associated with child poverty and early parenting is associated with the early parenting of the children. Is early parenting a cause or consequence of child poverty? Being brought up in a lone parent family is a cause and consequence of child poverty and there is some evidence that outcomes in education, employment, early partnering and future family stability are worse for children who experience lone parenthood. However no one has really been able to answer the question – is this due to lone parenthood or the poverty associated with it? The evidence suggests that poverty and parental conflict are more likely than family structure to be the cause of these outcomes.

Much of the evidence on the associations of child poverty and future life chances comes from longitudinal studies, in particular the birth cohort surveys. There is also evidence from spatial analysis of local areas with high proportions of poor children (as measured by the proportion of children in receipt of means-tested benefits) also having lower levels of employment, worse health, lower educational participation, more crime and worse housing and environments.<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen, one way these outcomes can be measured is by estimating their economic costs. Blanden and colleagues<sup>14</sup> used the 1970 British Birth Cohort survey to estimate the earnings loss at age 26, 29/30 and 34. They estimated that growing up in child poverty reduced earnings by 15–28% and the chances of being in employment by 4–7%. Most of the penalty was due to low skills. If child poverty had been abolished it would have generated an extra 1–1.8% of GDP from increased productivity, increased tax revenue and reduced benefit payments.

As part of the same research programme for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Bramley and Watkins<sup>15</sup> estimated the public services costs of child poverty including the personal social services, the health services, school education, police and criminal justice, housing, fire and safety, area based programmes and local environmental services. Their total estimate for 2006/7 was between £11.6 billion and £20.7 billion.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded<sup>16</sup> that child poverty costs the UK at least £25 billion a year, including £17 billion that could accrue to the Exchequer if child poverty were eradicated. Moving all families above the poverty line would not instantly produce this sum, but in the long term, huge amounts would be saved from not having to pick up the pieces of child poverty and associated social ills.

**'The moral case for eradicating child poverty rests on the immense human cost of allowing children to grow up suffering physical and psychological deprivations and unable to participate fully in society. But child poverty is also costly to everyone in Britain, not just those who experience it directly.'**<sup>17</sup>

Is it really poverty or parenting? There is no doubt that some children who grow up in poverty do very well in later life. Also there is recent evidence from the Millennium Cohort Survey that improving parenting behaviour and attitudes, and reducing maternal depression can mitigate the worst development outcomes of persistently poor children.<sup>18</sup> Poverty hinders good parenting, but positive parenting has



been estimated to mitigate only about half the impact of poverty on children's achievement in the first year of school.<sup>19</sup> Parenting matters at all levels of living. Poverty matters to the poor but affects all of us.

'Reductions in child poverty will benefit everyone: more children will fulfil their potential, more families and communities will prosper and the UK will succeed. This why it is in everyone's interest to play their role in eradicating child poverty.'<sup>20</sup>

Between 1999 and 2010, child poverty fell as a consequence of government efforts to eradicate child poverty. The result was an improvement in child well-being in all domains. UNICEF found that the UK moved from the bottom to the middle of the OECD league table on child well-being.<sup>21</sup> Now living standards are falling. Unemployment is high. Cuts in benefits and services have been loaded onto families with children. Benefits that mitigate the impact of poverty are for the first time since the 1930s being uprated by less than inflation. Absolute child poverty is increasing. This is a tragedy for the children affected, very bad for their futures, and for society as a whole.



# Hidden poverty: refugee and migrant families in the UK

Ilona Pinter\*

**'Suppose an outsider lives with you in your land. Then do not treat him badly. Treat him as if he were one of your own people. Love him as you love yourself. Remember that all of you were outsiders in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.'** (Leviticus 19:33–34)

**'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'** (Hebrews 13:2)

Tess Ridge and Jonathan Bradshaw have given us powerful descriptions of the impact of poverty on children's experience and life chances. In this essay, I will consider the treatment of those who are caught up in Britain's asylum and immigration systems.

As the verses above indicate, the treatment of migrants and refugees is a significant biblical theme. Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity, reproduced in so many of our homes and churches, is in fact called *The Hospitality of Abraham*. It is a picture both of the fellowship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the hospitality Abraham offered to strangers (Genesis 18), through which he 'entertained angels unawares'. The icon makes a connection which is at the heart of Christian theology and spirituality – one which Angus Ritchie and Sabina Alkire explore at greater length later in this collection – namely, the connection between generosity and hospitality here on earth and participation in the life and love of God.

The question of how migrants are treated is a spiritual as well as a moral and political issue. Christian theology suggests that our treatment of 'outsiders' and 'strangers' reveals something about the state of our hearts and our relationship with God. This essay draws on both academic research and personal testimony to describe our current behaviour and treatment of children in asylum-seeking families.

## Refugee and migrant children: hidden poverty

The experiences of families caught up in Britain's asylum and immigration systems are largely hidden from the rest of us. There are significant variations in the socio-economic status and living conditions of migrant families in the UK. This depends on which country they have come from and the reason they decided to come here. Nevertheless, research shows that overall, immigrant children are worse off than their native-born peers.<sup>22</sup> While many of these children are likely to be growing up in poverty and deprivation, they are often not identified in government statistics and policies related to child poverty.

We know from government data that children in black minority ethnic communities are more likely to experience poverty than their white counterparts. For example 58% of Bangladeshi and Pakistani children and 51% of black non-Caribbean children are living in poverty, compared to 26% of white children.<sup>23</sup> This correlates with findings from census data which highlight that particular immigrant groups in the UK, such as families of Bangladeshi, black African, Jamaican and Pakistani origin, are relatively disadvantaged.<sup>24</sup> In addition, census data shows that 1 in 4 children in immigrant families are living in overcrowded housing. This compares with a figure of 1 in 10 for native-born children.<sup>25</sup>

\*I would like to thank Caitlin Burbridge of the Contextual Theology Centre for her help and advice with this essay.



So, while ethnicity has significant implications for the situation and outcomes of children in the UK, it is clear that a child's immigration status is also a crucial factor in determining how likely they are to be living in poverty. This is because a family's immigration status has a decisive impact on their ability to access benefits, services and the labour market.<sup>26</sup>

Over the last decade, changes in immigration policy have significantly increased the risks of poverty for some categories of children, especially those in the asylum process, children who are 'undocumented' and do not have a legal status to remain in the UK,<sup>27</sup> children of low-paid migrant workers and those in refugee families.<sup>28</sup>

Despite this, refugee and migrant children remain largely absent from the child poverty debate overall, and policy solutions aimed at tackling child poverty in the UK do little to address their circumstances and lift them out of poverty.<sup>29</sup> This essay focuses particularly on children in asylum-seeking families.

### Poverty in the asylum support system

There are around 10,000 children in asylum-seeking families who receive support from the Home Office every year. Having fled war, persecution and violence from countries like Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iran, they usually arrive with no possessions or means of support. While their asylum claim is being processed by the Home Office, which can take many years, parents are generally not allowed to work.

During this period they cannot access mainstream benefits such as child benefit, housing benefit or income support, and will not be part of the new benefit system – Universal Credit. Where a family member has a disability, they are not entitled to additional support like disability living allowance or personal independence payments as they will now become. Many of these children will also be excluded from passported benefits such as Free School Meals and the Pupil Premium.<sup>30</sup>

These families' only means of survival is support from the Home Office. Analysis by The Children's Society showed<sup>31</sup> that support provided to these families is as little as half of what a British family would get on mainstream benefits. This means that families would need nearly three times more than they currently receive in order to be lifted out of poverty.<sup>32</sup>

Since 1999, asylum support has been reduced from 90% of income support to well below 70%. The government has a legal duty to review the levels of support for those on benefits on an annual basis; however, there is no such duty to review support for those seeking sanctuary in the UK. So while many mainstream benefits were uprated by 6.2% between 2011-13, asylum support rates have remained at the same level during this time.<sup>33</sup> As a result, these families are becoming increasingly worse off and being pushed further into poverty.



## A parallel two-tier system of support

Families receiving support from the Home Office generally receive one of two types, commonly known as 'Section 95' and 'Section 4' support.

### 1. 'Section 95' support for asylum-seeking families

Asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute<sup>34</sup> can obtain support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Families with children are entitled to this help from the time they arrive in the UK until they are granted refugee status. At this point they become eligible for mainstream benefits and are allowed to work. If they are refused asylum, the family will remain entitled to Section 95 until they leave voluntarily or are forcibly removed, as there are children involved.

The amount of financial support under Section 95 depends on a family's household circumstances and the child's age. For example, in 2011-12, a lone mother with a 16-year-old child would get £154.92 on mainstream benefits and just over half of that on Section 95 support (£83.74 or 54%).<sup>35</sup> Children aged 16 and 17 are treated as adults under asylum support, unlike in the mainstream system, despite the fact that many will still be in full-time education and will have additional costs.

### 2. 'Section 4' support for some refused asylum-seeking families

Each year around 800 children are supported on an 'austere regime' of support known as 'Section 4' support. This is typically the case for children who are born to an adult or couple after their asylum claim has been refused but where they cannot leave the UK (or where they have not claimed asylum support previously).

In this case a family may be entitled to Section 4 support if they satisfy extra requirements over and above destitution. This means that there has to be a temporary obstacle that prevents them from leaving the UK – for example if they are too sick to travel or if there is no viable route of return.

Under Section 4 they may only live in designated accommodation and instead of cash, they only receive money to cater for essential living needs on a payment card – the 'Azure Card'. This card can only be used at designated retail outlets to purchase food, essential toiletries and other items to the value of £35.39 per person per week or £5 per day. This is significantly lower than children and families receive on Section 95 or mainstream benefits. For example, a lone mother with a 16 year old child would get £70.78 on Section 4 support – equivalent to 46% of support on mainstream benefits.<sup>36</sup>

## Struggling to meet children's needs

There is an increasing body of evidence concerning the impact of poverty on children's physical and mental health, their emotional well-being and longer term outcomes. Low levels of support mean that asylum-seeking children do not always have enough healthy food to eat or warm clothes to wear, and have to deal with the day-to-day stresses and anxieties of living in poverty and social exclusion.

The families who gave evidence to the 2012 parliamentary inquiry on asylum support, which The Children's Society supported, spoke about what the levels of support they received meant for them in reality. One mother on Section 95 support said: 'I would buy one meal which I will share with my son. My son, is my priority, therefore I will provide his nutritional needs before my own and occasionally starving myself.'<sup>37</sup> Many families struggle to balance priorities: 'It is not enough money, even to buy warm clothes during the winter season. If we want to buy a jacket or a pair of

shoes, we have to sacrifice with our food.’<sup>38</sup> Children in this situation often miss out on school trips, cultural activities, learning how to swim or ride a bicycle, or going to a friend’s birthday party because there is no money.

This is particularly difficult for families on the lower level of cashless support provided under Section 4 (see box). Contrary to the stated aim of providing short-term support, over half of those on Section 4 are on it for two years or more.<sup>39</sup> The cashless system means that families cannot use public transportation; parents with small children have to walk long distances every day to take children to school or the shops. Having no money means not being able to buy milk from the corner shop or take a bus to go to the doctor – even in an emergency.

### Case study of premature twins<sup>40</sup>

The inquiry received a case study about a family with premature twins who were supported under Section 4. Unfortunately one of the babies died while in hospital. The other baby was eventually discharged with extreme health needs including supplementary oxygen. The family’s needs were not considered when their accommodation was allocated and they had to carry the baby and all his equipment, including heavy oxygen tanks, up and down the stairs to the flat.

The family has to make regular trips to the hospital with their new-born baby. Without cash on the Azure payment card they often have to walk, sometimes with heavy equipment. The parents have applied for additional payments but have rarely received them on time.

## Families experiencing destitution

Although no central government data is available, information from various voluntary organisations tells us that destitution among refugees and asylum-seekers is widespread, and that children make up between 13–20% of the local destitute population in some areas.<sup>41</sup> Several case studies submitted to the asylum support inquiry highlight how families are left homeless and without support for many weeks and months; they are forced to rely on hand-outs from charities, sleeping on floors of mosques or pushed into exploitative situations in order to survive.

### Case study of a mother and her children who slept on the floor<sup>42</sup>

A single mother, Nicole applied for Section 4 support at the beginning of January 2012 but her application was not accepted until June. During these five months, she and her two children aged six and three were sleeping on the floor of a mosque and surviving on hand-outs from people attending the mosque.

Evidence submitted to the inquiry on asylum support noted that the cashless Section 4 system was ‘part of a wider hostile environment to which refused asylum seekers are subjected in an effort to encourage them to return to their country of origin’. This approach was articulated by the Home Office Minister Lord Atlee, who said that:

‘Denying asylum seekers the right to work does make it difficult for them to integrate into our society and that is what we want... We do not want asylum seekers who have not determined their right to remain in the UK to become integrated into the UK because it makes it more difficult for them to return.’<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has drawn on both robust empirical research and personal testimony to describe the treatment of those seeking sanctuary in the UK. What emerges is sharply at odds with the dominant media narrative of Britain as a 'soft touch' for those who might wish to exploit the system.

Although this essay focuses on children fleeing war and persecution, it is important to highlight that there are many more children caught up in the immigration system who experience severe levels of poverty and deprivation – including homelessness – but whose access to vital public services is increasingly becoming restricted by government policy. For example, the government recently considered checking children's immigration status as part of the school admissions process and is currently considering introducing a residence test for access to legal aid, alongside proposals for limiting access to other services.<sup>44</sup>

The second part of this collection explores the role of the church – and of families, the wider civil society and the government – in the care and nurture of children. Inevitably, in the case of those seeking sanctuary in the UK, their first experience will be of the actions of government. It is through the state that our hospitality, or our indifference, is first experienced.

The evidence presented in this essay shows a yawning gulf between the way asylum-seeking families are treated and the biblical vision of hospitality and compassion. The UK has a long and proud tradition of providing a place of safety for refugees fleeing violence and intimidation, including those persecuted on the basis of their faith and beliefs. Many individuals and organisations are working to continue that tradition today. However, the tone of our national conversation on this issue – and the highly selective reporting in the mainstream media – is making asylum-seeking families a scapegoat for our wider social and economic anxieties. At local and national level, Christians are called to play a leading role in protecting and giving a voice to all those who come to this country in need of sanctuary – whatever their skin colour, nationality or faith.



# Part 2:

# Theological reflections





The essays by Tess Ridge and Jonathan Bradshaw leave us in no doubt as to the scale and impact of child poverty on children's current lives and on their futures. Ilona Pinter's contribution reveals the often hidden impoverishment of families seeking sanctuary.

This section of the book explores how Christians are called to respond to this challenging testimony. Its first essay sets the question in a wider theological context – showing how our practical care of those living in poverty enables us to grow together in the life and love of God. Sabina Alkire and I explore the nature of truly Christian compassion, and also consider how our responsibilities to those in need in this country relate to the challenge of global poverty. We argue that the answer to both of these questions lies in the Triune nature of God. Christians are called to relationships of mutual care and blessing, not to a 'false charity' that is impersonal and flows only in one direction. Moreover, we do not have a limited quantity of generosity to share between these different claims. Engaging in compassionate action, precisely because it is a sharing in God's life, enlarges our hearts. We suggest this is borne out in practical experience as well as theological argument.

Michael Ipgrave's essay explores the Christian tradition of the 'lordship of the poor,' and its roots in the Bible and the practice of Christ. This essay offers a conceptual and existential framework for understanding poverty, and invites the wider church to respond in a way that avoids the kind of condescension which Sabina and I both warn against. As Bishop Michael shows, treating the poorest as 'our lords' (*domini nostri*) profoundly reshapes our response.

Having sketched out this wider framework, the following three essays explore the role of Church, family and government in tackling child poverty. John Milbank's essay argues that the church is the 'site of the true society,' as it seeks to embody the fellowship at the heart of God. Milbank argues that this has implications for the wider political debate, arguing for the primacy of relationships in the way poverty is addressed. Attempts to reduce the poverty of children will only be effective if they support the families and communities in which they are nurtured. Krish Kandiah offers a biblical account of the vocation of the family, and its role in helping us to share God's life and love. His essay offers a timely warning against judgmentalism, reminding us that 'even the most renowned biblical families are radically dysfunctional and yet within the grace of God greatly used by him to do good in the world.'

In the final essay, I discuss the vocation of government, and the role it should play in addressing child poverty. The ordering of these essays is deliberate, as a key part of my argument is that church, family and the wider civil society ought to be the primary agents in our care for one another – and that government needs to be more responsive to their voices and concerns. There is a striking cross-party consensus about the need to reduce child poverty and the vital role of faith, family and civil society. The challenge, I argue, is to turn those words into effective action.



# Does charity begin at home?

Angus Ritchie and Sabina Alkire

## Introduction

How should we weigh the needs of our immediate neighbours against those living further afield? A growing chorus objects to the size of Britain's international aid budget, on the grounds that poverty is also increasing at home (in the ways described so powerfully in the first section of this collection). Conversely, charities working in the UK are sometimes told that poverty in Britain is 'only relative' and that 'real' deprivation is only found abroad.

It is a mistake to speak as if alleviating domestic and global poverty are mutually exclusive tasks. The experiences of local churches show we do not have a fixed capacity for generosity which is 'used up' either by the needs of those near us, or those further afield. Far from exhausting our capacity for generosity to those beyond our shores, practicing generosity to our immediate neighbours can enhance our capacity to act against wider injustices.

## A theology of generosity

Christians understand the goal of all life to be communion with our maker. As members of the Body of Christ, human beings enter into the flow of love and adoration that is at the heart of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our destiny is to be 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). The communion we share as human beings reflects, and participates in, the life of God (cf. John 17).

In baptism and the Eucharist, water, bread and wine draw us into fellowship with God in Christ. Because it is a gift to us from God, Christians also understand the whole of the physical world to be *sacramental*. The way we use our bodies, and the way we treat the wider material world can either build us up in communion with our neighbours, in a way that participates in God's life – or can be a source

of alienation from both our neighbours and our Creator. That is why so much teaching in the Bible relates to the way we use our possessions, and indeed our bodies:

**'No one has ever seen God, but when we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us.'** (1 John 4:12)

This has two important implications for a Christian understanding of poverty. Firstly, human beings are not ultimately in competition with one another. This is not to deny that scarcity is a very real part of our daily life – especially at a time of economic crisis. But Christianity calls us to recognise our fellow human beings as more than rivals for scarce material resources. Rather, we are to recognise one another as gifts from God, and the material world as a means by which we can grow in communion (cf. Genesis 2:18).

What does it mean to recognise my neighbour as a gift from God? Martin Luther defined sin as *cor cervatus in se* ('the heart closed in upon itself'). It is through our neighbour that we hear God's summons to grow beyond the prison of the solitary, self-absorbed ego – and it is through our neighbour that we learn the art of generous self-offering, of learning, exchange and journeying together. The New Testament indicates that, in doing so, we find God to be both present in the neighbour who we assist (Matthew 25:40) and in the bond of love this generates (cf. 1 John 4).

Secondly, we are called to develop relationships of mutual generosity. In doing so, our human relationships reflect the life of God, in whose communion there is both equality and difference.

To talk of 'mutuality' is not to deny that relationships among humans have inequalities of capacity and responsibility. The relationship between adults and children is an obvious example where such inequality is inevitable, and indeed healthy. Nonetheless, the Bible is clear that there is a process of mutual learning and blessing in the relationship between adults and children. Adults help children grow into maturity, both physically and spiritually (Luke 2:52; 1 Corinthians 14:20). Children have a distinctive insight into the Kingdom of God, which adults need to be humble enough to receive (Matthew 11:25; Luke 18:16). Children are taught by adults and yet are also our teachers.

A relationship between human beings in which one sees themselves entirely as the donor, and the other entirely as supplicant, fails to reflect the dignity of either party. To recognise my neighbours' dignity involves acknowledging the ways in which they can bless and transform me, as well as the blessing I am called to be to each of them. Indeed, as Bishop Michael reminds us in the next essay, Christian tradition has gone so far as to speak of the 'lordship of the poor' (*domini nostri*), a rich concept that is rooted in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25.

### False charity and divine love

This stress on mutuality is crucial if 'charity' is not to become a pretext for abusing and dominating those around us. Perhaps the most famous depiction of this false charity is found in Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*.<sup>45</sup> Mrs Jellyby is consumed by her so-called 'charity' for those in need abroad. The objects of her charity are just that: objects, who allow her to project an image of generosity, whilst in fact treating those in her immediate care (most notably her long-suffering children) with cruelty and neglect.

The character of Mrs Jellyby warns us against seeing the needs of our family, and of those beyond it, as competing demands. We must not imagine that the opening of our hearts to one group involves closing them to another.

God's love is particular and personal, and yet it knows no bounds of kin and race (Galatians 3:28). To the extent that our love participates in God's, it must embrace our families, our

immediate neighbours and those we will never meet. Jesus challenges both our lack of love for our families (Mark 7:10–12) and an exclusive love of family and kin-group (cf. Matthew 3:9 and 10:37).

The cultivation of such love is a work of grace, not a purely human achievement. The irony – and tragedy – of Mrs Jellyby is that her so-called 'concern' for those on the other side of the world, and her need to preserve a self-image of charity and righteousness, precludes any truly compassionate encounters with actual human beings. It is when we understand that righteousness is not something we earn, but is itself a gift from God, that he can truly transform and expand our hearts – so that our action for justice is founded on authentic love for our fellow human beings, wherever they are found.

Reflecting on *Bleak House*, the Orthodox peace activist Jim Forrest writes:

'Many saints of the last hundred years would readily recognise Mrs Jellyby and could identify her real-life counterparts. In Russia, for example, in the mid- and late-19th century there was an explosion of radical movements which, while dedicated to various social reforms, abandoned care of neighbour and relative as a bourgeois waste of time.'<sup>46</sup>

Forrest goes on to show that the two antidotes to this temptation are found in 'a deep, disciplined spiritual life' – an openness to God's forgiveness, grace and presence – and an cultivation of love that is concrete and not merely abstract:

'God is love. We move toward God through no other path than love itself. It is not a love expressed in slogans or ideologies, but actual love; love experienced in God, love that binds us to those around us, love that lets us know others not through ideas and fears but through God's love for them: a way of seeing that transfigures social relationships.'<sup>47</sup>

There are certainly many paths to learning a more universal, instinctive, and constant unconditional love. These might include spiritual exercises like intercessory prayer, meditations to generate love, or using the examen at the close of a day to observe moments when love beamed through and when distractions impeded it. But the most frequented school of love is the family itself.

### Family and church as 'schools of love'

On the Christian understanding, the needs of our immediate family can be balanced with the needs of those beyond the home. Indeed, the family is called to be a 'school of love' in which the care and concern shared within the home overflow quite naturally into concern for those in need beyond its walls. Later in this section, Krish Kandiah explores this 'porousness' of the family from an evangelical perspective. In *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II describes the way the immediate family can be a place of formation in such love:

'Christian families, recognizing with faith all human beings as children of the same heavenly Father, will respond generously to the children of other families, giving them support and love not as outsiders but as members of the one family of God's children. Christian parents will thus be able to spread their love beyond the bonds of flesh and blood, nourishing the links that are rooted in the spirit and that develop through concrete service to the children of other families, who are often without even the barest necessities.'<sup>48</sup>

The local congregation and community have an analogous calling. They too are to be 'schools of love'. As in our family, so in the way we relate to the neighbours we can see, we learn what it is to show compassion – through face-to-face encounter, not abstract exhortations. It is from such encounters that we develop compassion for those we cannot see, by means of imaginative identification and loving response.

One example of such face-to-face engagement is given later in this book, as Adam Atkinson and Andy Walton describe the life of St Peter's Church in Bethnal Green, London. They explain the ways in which care of children within the congregation is helping the church to engage with child and youth poverty beyond the church's walls – both in the local neighbourhood (which has one of the highest incidences of child poverty in the UK) and on the international level.

The authors of this current essay have spent some of their ordained ministries in inner-city churches (Sabina in Washington, Boston and east Oxford, and Angus in east London). Our experience echoes that of Adam and Andy. In each of the communities where we have ministered, we have seen how openness to the needs and gifts of neighbours within the church can lead on both to a deeper engagement with the needs of those beyond its walls, and to an understanding of structural and international dimensions of injustice. As migration mixes our societies and identities, this mingling becomes rather natural, as many people have immediate or extended family on further shores.

In our response to poverty at home and abroad, there is a need both to understand the structural dimensions of injustice and complement this with a truly personal encounter. If we do not seek to develop some kind of relationship with those in greatest need, then (whether in Bethnal Green or the Sudan), they remain trapped in our imagination as passive recipients of charity – 'the poor' rather than co-workers for, and co-heirs of, God's Kingdom.

In Bethnal Green, this insight has inspired the church to move beyond the impersonal yet important charity of setting up a box for food donations – in to face-to-face engagement with, and action alongside, those experiencing poverty. The twinning of churches and dioceses in different parts of the world are one way to bring mutuality to the work being done to tackle global poverty – so that we move beyond the facelessness of Mrs Jellyby's one-way donation, and into a relationship in which each party learns from and enriches the other.



## Conclusion

Drawing on Christian theology, and on our own experiences of ministry, we have argued that the poverty of children in the UK and around the world should not be seen as competing demands upon the British church. We have suggested that in fact, the exercise of generous love in our immediate community enlarges our appetite and capacity for action to tackle international injustices.

Research from The Children's Society seems to bear out this argument. Congregations which give to the Society were asked to identify the charities they have worked with most often in the last two years. The churches which engaged most with The Children's Society (which works with children in need in England and Wales) were also those who engaged most with Christian Aid (whose focus is on areas of extreme poverty across the globe). This suggests that an increasing intensity of support for children in poverty at home goes along with an increasing intensity of support for children in poverty around the world. Charity may or may not begin at home. But if it is truly Christ-like, it can never be content to end there.



# The Gospel, poverty and the 'lordship of the poor'

Michael Ipgrave

In thinking about the Gospel and poverty, we need to face two kinds of issue: conceptual issues, about how we define poverty, and the ethical values that Christian faith brings to bear on poverty; and existential issues, about how those who are poor are related to us in the Gospel – and in particular, those who are poor children. A theological approach needs to address both these dimensions; without the existential, we have only a set of social, economic or political theories; without the conceptual, there is just a practice of pastoral care suffused with spirituality. We need to understand poverty in order to measure it and to deal with its problems; we need to relate to poor people in order to know their experiences, which are often hidden in our society.

This collection is rightly addressing both issues. The first three essays offered us a vivid and disturbing account of both the nature and experience of poverty. The previous contribution rooted the Christian response in our understanding of God as Trinity – warning us against the 'false charity' that fails to accord those in greatest need their genuine God-given dignity. This essay seeks to build upon these insights, by drawing on the rich imagery of the 'lordship of the poor' in Christian thought. I will argue that, in relating to their experiences and responding to their needs, Christians need constantly to bear in mind that it is indeed the poorest who are 'our lords' (*domini nostri*).

## What is poverty?

It is difficult to define poverty, but not to recognise it. There is much debate about the relationship between 'relative' and 'absolute' poverty. Tess Ridge's essay shows us very clearly that poverty has a relative dimension. This is also a deeply Christian insight: as the previous contribution reminded us, Christian theology understands the material world to be sacramental, given to us to enable us to grow in relationship. To speak of poverty

according to a relative definition in no way lessens its reality: poverty is a denial of the potential for human flourishing, and human flourishing always takes place in relation to other humans, rather than being measured against an absolute. It seems impossible to read the first section of this book and have a dismissive attitude to 'relative poverty'. And if poverty is in large part relative, that highlights its connection with inequality: poverty is multiplied as inequality grows. Inequality impacts negatively on central Christian values such as justice, communion and reverence.

Dramatic and growing inequality offends against our sense of justice. Although we know that the world is fallen, from our sense of fairness we reason analogically to the justice which God wills for his creation. We feel that it cannot be the divine purpose for obscene riches to coexist with abject poverty. In a society of marked inequality, St John Chrysostom wrote:

'Tell me, how is it that you are rich? From what did you receive your wealth? Your father? And he, whom did he receive it from? From your grandfather, you say. And he, where did he receive it from? From his father, you say? By climbing this genealogical tree you are able to show the justice of this possession? Of course you cannot; rather its beginning and root have come out of injustice.'

Chrysostom links inequality with injustice, in the transmission of economic status from generation to generation. It is iniquitous that poverty should be inherited from the beginning of an individual's life. There is also a formational deficit for children in poverty: it is hard for them to have a sense of justice if all they have experienced is poverty.

**Communion** is a deep and transcendent vision of the human vocation, including reconciliation, a shared community, and relationship to the divine. It is to communion with God in Christ that we believe all people are called. The idea that is opposed to communion is 'exclusion'. The links between inequality and exclusion are strong, obvious and resilient. Those whose living standards are far removed from the main body of their fellow citizens, those living in poverty, are likely to feel excluded from the common good and from any shared purpose; that sense of exclusion will be amplified by modern society's relentless consumerism, with its refrain that your personal worth is measured by what you possess (more accurately, what you acquire). The effects of inequality in creating a sense of exclusion among children seem particularly heinous. The sense of being unable to do what others do easily generates feelings of worthlessness and resentment among children; and Jesus is quite clear in the Gospels about the imperative not to cause offence to children (Matthew 18:6).

**Reverence** is an individual person's proper orientation to God as Creator. Christian faith, in common with the wisdom of other religious traditions, knows that extremes of either wealth or deprivation lead to a lack of reverence for the Creator:

'Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the LORD?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.' (Proverbs 30:8-9).

For the poor, a sense of despair can destroy faith in the kindness of God. For the rich, failure to recognise creaturely status, an illusion of unlimited power to make choices, creates an illusion of immortality. So in Jesus' story of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the rich man forgets the reality of God through ignoring the poor man at his gate, and is startled by the reality of his mortality. After death, the great divide of social inequality becomes fixed by the divine presence into a gulf that cannot be crossed. The summons to a life of reverence comes to all humans made in the image and likeness of God, and it questions any division of the poor into categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. St Paul teaches that all have

'fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23); we should be wary of any facile distinctions of this kind. Even if some case could be made for a calculus of merit in adult poverty, surely children living in poverty cannot be receiving the consequences of their actions. Luke does not tell us if Lazarus had any children, but if he had they would have been born poor. We must have a particular concern for the damaging impact that inequality will have on children's sense of reverence, whether born to extremes of riches or of poverty.

## The lordship of the poor

Existential questions challenge us with the actual and continuing presence of the poor in our society, and in particular the poor who are children. Here are real people, children and adults, who are poor; without trying to justify the continuing existence of poverty, we must ask about our relationship with them in the Gospel. Jesus said that 'the poor you have always with you, but you will not always have me' (Matthew 26:11). When Christians have reflected on these words, they have sensed that there is in some way a continuing presence of Christ among his people who are poor. One way in which they have spoken about this has been the idea that 'the poor are our lords' (*domini nostri*). This 'lordship of the poor' is a challenging phrase, because it associates poverty with dominion in a way we find counter-intuitive; but it is rich in meaning. In hearing it, we need to remember that for Christians 'lordship' has been redefined by Jesus; it is not about self-assertion and exaction, but about responsibility and service. Our vision is not of any person or group getting an advantage over another, but of mutuality and partnership.

The first reference to the poor as 'lords and masters' is in the life of St John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria (c. 560-619 CE). John had a strong sense that in the heavenly court – in stark contrast to the corrupt imperial regime of his day – it was the dispossessed who were influential as courtiers and patrons:

'Those whom you call poor and beggars, these I proclaim my masters and helpers. For they, and they only, are really able to help us and bestow upon us the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>49</sup>



This is a vision of an alternative society: one in which it is the poor who have priority. This is the promise that Jesus proclaimed: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). John's activities were striking – he gave away vast amounts of the patriarchal revenue – but his vision was more radical still: a social order in which those who were poor would be those who held power. That vision may be easily dismissed by many as utopian, but it is important to hold it before us as Christians, to motivate and inspire our thinking and our actions. When we look at the reality of children in poverty in the United Kingdom and we dream dreams, we need to ask: what is the society we want to see, for them to be our lords and masters?

St John the Almsgiver came to be the first patron saint of the Order of St John, as the Knights Hospitaller established in his honour the Hospital of St John in Jerusalem, treating the sick and poor of every race and religion at the time of the Crusades. Taking up John's theme, the rule of the Order explained that 'the poor are to be served like a lord, *quasi dominus*, because they are our lords'. The phrase *quasi dominus* has a double interpretation. Most obviously, it means, 'like a feudal lord'. In the language of the established social order, it means that it is real, earthly poor people who are to be treated as those from whom we take direction, those who set the agenda. This kind of attitude was strong in the later Middle Ages – the wonderful Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune, for example, was founded by Nicolas Rolin, the fabulously wealthy Chancellor of the Dukes of Burgundy, as an expression of his devotion to the poor as his *domini*. The same spirit animated St Vincent de Paul and those who have followed him in giving their lives up to charitable service of the poor as their lords and masters. Charity, we know, is not enough; but neither is charity to be decried. Given the number of children living in poverty today, how can our charitable activities best serve them?

The poor are to be served *quasi dominus*; another way of reading that is to give Dominus a capital 'D': 'the Lord' – to see in the poor the presence specifically of the Lord Jesus. This draws on the Benedictine spirituality of welcoming and serving the stranger as the one who is Christ to us. It reminds us of Jesus' words of judgement and blessing when as king

he will divide the nations into sheep and goats: 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). Bishop Frank Weston of Zanzibar spoke powerfully about the service of Jesus in the poor as well as in the Eucharist, of the way in which worship could not be divorced from social action:

'You have got your Mass, you have got your Altar, you have begun to get your Tabernacle. Now go out into the highways and hedges where not even the Bishops will try to hinder you. Go out and look for Jesus in the ragged, in the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus. And when you see him, gird yourselves with his towel and try to wash their feet.'<sup>50</sup>

Our relationship with poor people must be conditioned by our faith in the Incarnation, which creates an indissoluble bond between the presence of Christ and those who share, however unwillingly, his condition of poverty. And that link to the Lord is stronger still when we speak of the poverty of children. Jesus said, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:5).

# What a Christian view of society says about poverty

John Milbank

## Introduction

There's been a lot of public debate in the last few years about the Big Society and the Good Society, and the invocation of the word 'social'.

This is a fascinating political juncture that we shouldn't dismiss too quickly, because seeing the primacy of the social dimension to life is a deeply Christian insight. In a sense, the Church invented the social world. In the antique world you had the familial, the tribal and the political communities. But this idea of having a space of free association – people coming together for all kinds of social purposes of organisation and running their own lives – was only vestigially present in the antique world. It became far more common because the Church itself was one enormous free association. It was also an international association, which spawned in the Middle Ages all kinds of other free associations beneath its umbrella. These took different forms after the Reformation, leading to the way in which the Church today is a gathering of all kinds of smaller associations.

The importance of the 'free association' in defining society is in the way that it gives equal weight to both components of that term. It is about liberty, yes, but liberty achieved through people coming together to explore a common purpose. We don't have a significant range for our freedom if we are acting alone; we can be more free together than in isolation. Each individual low-paid worker might be free to ask for higher wages, for example, but they won't get far because each is in competition with the other for a job. Yet when those individuals work together (for example, through the London Citizens Living Wage campaign) they are able to achieve a fairer wage. Being paid a living wage also gives those individuals more genuine options, and therefore more freedom, such as having more time to spend with family because they no longer need to do multiple jobs. Individual freedom is here enhanced by association and

corporate action. We can be freer together than in isolation. This insight has implications far beyond both politics and economics, but is often excluded by both, because neither sees the social as primary.

## Beyond the secular left and right

Right-wing parties have tended to speak in the name of economics, defending the unfettered rights of commodity exchange. Left-wing parties have tended to speak in the name of the political, arguing for the importance of a hierarchical bureaucracy designed to maximise public happiness and equality of opportunity. However, this division was always more apparent than real: both left and right agree that the only viable public goals are the secular ones of maximising material contentment and private liberty. The Christian vision of society offers a great deal more.

The Christian social vision goes beyond economics, at least in the sense of buying and selling merely in order to pursue our individual interest. A Christian notion of the economy subordinates it to the social, because it is, as far as possible, about nurturing a social or 'civil' economy. It recognises that pursuing your own interests doesn't have to be antithetical to having a social or mutual concern.

Similarly, the social goes beyond politics in the sense that the latter is about law and the minimal conditions for human flourishing. Politics alone cannot proceed beyond that, in the direction of reconciliation and forgiveness, and to a more concrete vision of what the good life is. This should be happening at the social level. Again, as with the economy, politics must serve the social rather than the other way around. Indeed it cannot be neutral, but will always support some vision of the good life, whether this is supportive or destructive of social cohesion. That vision must come from somewhere other than political

processes themselves. If it doesn't, it tends to be a vision imposed by a rather arrogant technocratic elite.

The more that Christians have the social dimension at the heart of their public vision, the more they pursue a particular approach which remembers that the Church is trying to be the kingdom in embryo. The Church itself is the site of the true society. It is the project that brings in everything: there are no easy boundaries between the secular and the sacred. We find its transcendent reference point when gathered round the Eucharist, receiving the gifts of God and giving back the gifts of God. This models the mutuality and reciprocity necessary in all community.

That word – 'reciprocity' – accompanies the concept of free association. Reciprocity is about gift exchange rather than simply contracts or the imposition of laws. Charity or Christian love is in its fullness the enactment of reciprocity, not the one-way giving of something to somebody else without true relationality. In the best Christian theology, charity has always been a practice of mutuality and personal encounter involving constant give and take.

This kind of reciprocity happens in physical and social space. There is also a more complex form which happens across time. This is most obvious in the educational process. God himself teaches us through the centuries, and this is practically enacted and transmitted through the generations of Christians. For each person this initially involves submission, before children or students grow up and then give something back, becoming transmitters in their turn. Perhaps all justifiable inequality is ultimately to do with this educational or formative process, which includes the way in which some people are permanently able to exercise greater skills than others. It's justifiable because it is for the good of everybody. There is a hierarchy in medicine, for example, because if there wasn't, there would be no passing on of goods, no education in medical practice, and no effective offering of advice and cures to patients. If there were no hierarchy of healers, it would be impossible for people to be healed.

## Implications for our understanding of poverty

How does this affect our understanding of poverty? There is one group of Christians who tend to think of Christianity as an exclusively spiritual matter, where we are all equal spiritually and the Church community is secondary, not the primary social focus. That can sometimes translate into an individualist approach to social policy. On the other hand, since the 19th century, there has been a tendency to hand over the incarnational mission of the Church to the state. In other words, to see the state as the more complete realisation of the Church's social mission than the Church itself. It is sometimes said that we can't stop at charity, and that all Christian reformers have wanted to go on to address the law. One can see the serious point of this and in certain respects such an advance is crucial, and yet there is a profound question mark over that whole tradition which William Temple exemplified. It is a rather Hegelian one that tends ultimately to surrender things to the state, as if the political lay beyond the social. Modern Anglican social thought has always been divided between that approach and one (associated with J.N. Figgis and Vigo Demant) which stresses less state intervention, but much more interpersonal action and people taking the initiative to do things for themselves.

The temptation to advocate legislation often means losing focus on interpersonal relationships, and losing focus on the notion that you treat recipients of charity as human beings. It is because the Christian vision keeps people's humanity central that we accord them the dignity of demanding something from them. The problem with the dominant alternatives to this vision is that they are devoid of this social concern and therefore deeply impersonal. We are faced with either pure market theorists who think welfare will trickle down in a perfect economy and it will all sort itself out, or a left-wing version of the same impersonality where you want to redress the balance so that everyone can act equally in the same depersonalised market – an approach with dire consequences for the inevitable 'losers' in such a agonistic game. This is not the way of the Church, which should rather take seriously Ed Miliband's point that a 'something for nothing' neoliberal culture has impacted at all levels and erupted with understandable fury at the base of the social pyramid.

If the Church is confused about its response to poverty, then more specific confusion exists over how to approach the issue of child poverty in particular. This is undoubtedly an area of social policy which many agree it is a priority. Yet it is not obvious why that should be, or how to go about solving it. And it may not be at all helpful to imagine that child poverty should be separated from poverty in general. To do so tends to favour state or market solutions specifically targeted at children as individuals, rather than at their families and the communities of which children are part. Since children are not yet capable of adult agency, such a non-social approach is here particularly insidious and particularly prone to failure.

To begin with, while adults might be to some degree culpable for their predicament, children are the blameless innocents. A child's family, and therefore the material circumstances in which they are brought up, is an accident of birth. But this can suggest to 'experts' that being born to a certain someone is unfortunate. To which Christians must respond that it is never unfortunate. If, theologically, we must celebrate every given life as divine creation, then we have to be wary of treating any birth as if it was a disaster, either in natural or in cultural terms. And a child's legacy – irrespective of what judgements we might make of it – is a legacy from their parents. There might be issues and implications springing from that legacy to which a response is required, but we cannot ignore, or erase, that legacy by wishing away a child's parents.

When a child is born to parents unable or unwilling to care for them appropriately, we unthinkingly assume the state must automatically become responsible for them. There is something worrying about that assumption. We need rather to ask searching questions about quite how much nurturing and educational responsibility over children we hand to a state that increasingly has no goals save its own economic power, and no interest in the person save as an atomised and preferably gender-neutral (and so all the more disembodied and abstracted) cog in a well-oiled machine.

This is not to suggest that children are instead only the responsibility of their parents. They are also the responsibility of communities. Yet we are all afraid now, for reasons all too well known (but whose causes require much more critical consideration) of taking part in a common bringing up of our children. The sense of a shared adult responsibility for the next generation has collapsed. This is an appalling circumstance, not least as it places too much of the burden of bringing up children on the parents alone. In the wider culture, nurture is now no longer a collaborative project. But in our churches, at least, it should still be so.

### **Tackling child poverty – a Christian vision**

Given the centrality of parents and community rather than primarily the state in the upbringing of children, one can also question the common emphasis in recent years on specifically child poverty. This derives from a questionable focus on equality of opportunity, which the state is supposed to try to secure.

The main problem with this objective is that it's not radical enough. It suggests that what we mainly need is the same fair chances in the game of life. That's fine, but what if you fail? Do we simply shrug and accept the ensuing stigma, and now you don't matter so much?

The Christian attitude stands against this by holding that all people matter equally in the community. This entails that all matter equally in the economy too. We just as much need people to sweep the floors and man the tills as we do to be professors and business managers. All these people need to be treated in terms of dignity of labour. The Christian priority cannot therefore be equality of opportunity. It is not even equality of outcome, except in the terms of equality of human flourishing. There is never going to be absolute equality: even Marx denounced such a goal as a liberal delusion. Instead, we should all be flourishing and contributing and receiving rewards in terms of our ability, capacity and virtue.

The weight of Christian tradition over centuries supports that kind of view. It sounds somewhat conservative, but in reality it is radical, because when you have no notion of justifiable inequality then you get unjustifiable inequality. That leads to the rule of the talentless, the



virtue-less, the shallow, the ruthless, the swaggeringly rich and ultimately the criminal. And if one thing characterises the world today, it is the effective criminalisation of both business and politics.

Focusing on child poverty might just about rescue a few individuals from desperate circumstances, but it won't stop those circumstances arising for future children. Doing that requires a holistic approach in which we both challenge and assist whole families and whole communities. It's a matter of Christian care for all children, along with their often unfortunate parents, not plucking a few out of poverty.

The current fashion for correcting an overall dire situation through public education and child-targeted policies is unlikely to get very far. For they capture none of the potential of working through free associations, which bear the weight of social life. At the moment we have the wrong form of paternalism; it's all top-down, impersonal economic and technical tinkering. We need instead the right kind of patrician legacy, which promotes the growth of virtue and encourages a debate about what the good life is. Poverty alone isn't the problem. Simply giving more money to the poor – even if this is indeed often required – won't resolve the issues facing our communities. For we need to face the fact that people's capacity to endure and survive poverty has declined as part of a general 'crisis of agency' which ensures that people are unable to organise in the face of distress the way they did in the past. This is because – as the great Catholic social thinker Ivan Illich argued before his death – people increasingly see themselves as objective units in a system and no longer genuinely as 'subjects' at all.

As part of this phenomenon, the unmeasured decline in working class education is a cause for real concern. Literacy was higher when people did these things for themselves. For example, consider the importance of children being able to read. The child that can't has a thin chance in life to survive poverty, let alone escape it. Quite modest things like classes for parents to teach them to read to their children can make a real difference without needing to immediately transform their whole economic situation, even though that remains important. We can't deal with the children without dealing with the parents. The connections between

child and parent, family and the community, are integral to any serious approach to tackling poverty. The Christian view of society holds these relationships central to our vision, and our solutions.

If you realise that the Church itself provides a way for the social dimension to subsume and transcend politics and economics, that implies a much more collaborative approach to the whole issue of poverty. Above all it means, as far as the Church is concerned, a shift in direction away from the Temple legacy of long reports telling the government what to do and being admired by the liberal press while the laity is secretly and wisely sceptical. We need a move instead to a much greater and more genuine radicalism in which the Church gets involved in all kinds of processes of welfare, medicine, banking, education, business, and more. The social dimension needs again to be the defining consideration of our common life. The Church, when it is being truest to itself, is capable of embedding this concern beyond the reach of mere economics and politics. More than ever this is what the Church now needs to do in this country – as an aspect of its own mission – if it is to save both itself and the legacy of the United Kingdom.



# Six theological theses on the family and poverty

Krish Kandiah

Evangelicals have a fantastic tradition both of caring for the poor and of strengthening the family.<sup>51</sup> Sadly we often keep these two concerns separate from one another and may have thereby inadvertently exacerbated underlying problems. In this short paper I propose six theological theses that may help us both understand and redress the balance.<sup>52</sup>

## 1. The family is an essential part of God's shalom and necessary for the flourishing of creation

The first thing that is said to be wrong in the universe – even before the fall – is isolation: 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). God's intention for human flourishing was not isolated individuals in pious private relationship with himself. Human companionship has always been an essential element of God's shalom. The observation of the inadequacy of isolation is the corollary of the blessing of God on humanity:

'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground"'. (Genesis 1:26–28)

As part of human companionship, families in all their various forms are a seminal part of what it means to be made in the image of God. In their vice-regent role of ruling over creation as God's vassals, reproductive fruitfulness is encouraged as the family is commissioned by God as part of his good created order. Men and women in 'a relationship characterised by harmony and intimacy between the partners',<sup>53</sup> share the privilege and responsibility of being made in the image of God, and with that, the call to steward creation together with

their offspring. Children are included in God's purposes for the benevolent and godly task of 'making something of the world.'<sup>54</sup>

Numerous authors have characterised the shalom of God in terms of four essential relationships:<sup>55</sup>

- Relationship with God
- Relationship with others
- Relationship with place
- Relationship with self

God's intention from the beginning of his Word is that each of these relationships is rightly ordered. All four of these creational relationships connect with family life as human beings image God best in community – as we care for creation together and in so doing find our sense of identity.

## 2. A Christian view of poverty must be genuinely holistic

Because all four dimensions of 'shalom' are damaged at the fall, poverty exists. There is spiritual poverty as human beings are alienated from God; and relational poverty as human relationships fall short of representing the gracious compassion and humility of God, leading to every level of breakdown in human relationships from genocide to bullying, from rape to the neglect of children. Material poverty exists as there is breakdown between humanity and nature as seen in climate change, exploitative land grabs, and multinational companies polluting water supplies to such an extent that a billion people do not have adequate access to food or clean water. Finally we see poverty of being – where human beings face personal alienation leading to poor aspiration and self-image.

None of these factors can be explored or explained fully in isolation from the others. Material poverty receives the most public attention – with pictures of starving children

rightly causing great concern. But personal breakdown, relational breakdown and spiritual breakdown can all be contributive factors or direct consequences. Conversely material wealth can also be a cause of other forms of poverty.<sup>56</sup>

A robust Christian theology of family and poverty will therefore take into account this holistic view of the shalom of God.

### 3. Family structures are diverse and contextual

There is no single Hebrew word that directly corresponds to what we in the West refer to as 'the nuclear family'. In the Old Testament, three words inform the Hebrew understanding of family:

1. *ševet* – this is often translated as 'tribe' and denotes ethnic origins.
2. *Bêt ab* – this can mean a family consisting of parents and children (Genesis 50:7–8) or a wider group consisting of multiple generations of relatives (Genesis 7:1; 14:14).
3. *Mišpahâ* – this usually refers to a 'clan', and often has a territorial as well as a relational significance (Numbers 27:8–11; Judges 18:11).<sup>57</sup>

The Old Testament is replete with examples of varied family structures. Though the first human marriage is clearly monogamous, it is not held up as a model of human flourishing – particularly as the first two children are a murderer and his victim. There are examples within Israel's central story of polygamous families such as the patriarch Jacob with his two wives and 13 children. There are instances of harems and concubines – most famously Solomon, the wisest man on the planet, with 700 wives and 300 concubines. There are also references to single parent families, blended families, foster families, kinship carers and adoptions. Interracial marriage too was practised and is both commended (cf. the Book of Ruth) and forbidden (Nehemiah 13:23–27). The New Testament removes any barrier to mixed race marriage, encourages monogamy rather than polygamy (especially for leaders – cf. Titus 1:5–9), and forbids adultery. The New Testament both encourages singleness as a high calling and also honours the relationship

between a husband and a wife as a visual aid for the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25). Additionally the New Testament also encourages parents that their role is analogous to God's Fatherhood of all humanity (Ephesians 3:15).

We must beware of anachronistic retrofitting into scripture an idea of the Western post-Enlightenment nuclear family as the norm. Even the most renowned biblical families are radically dysfunctional and yet within the grace of God greatly used by him to do good in the world.<sup>58</sup>

### 4. Family boundaries are to be strong but porous

The resilience of family covenant relationships, like marriage in the Bible, appears in marked contrast to the temporarily binding legal arrangements that are the norm in contemporary Western societies. In an increasingly disposable society the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman draws attention to 'the new frailty of family structures, with many a family's life expectation shorter than the individual life expectation of any of its members'.<sup>59</sup> The Bible offers us a picture of long-term familial ties that last for generations. Heritage, honour and social expectation all help to provide the social glue to support covenantally faithful relationships.

But even when it comes to looking at the New Testament, we must be careful not to assume that these values were universally held in a golden age of family cohesion. Divorce was common in the ancient world: under Roman law marriage could be dissolved at the request of either partner and also in the Jewish culture where marriage could only be dissolved at the request of the husband.<sup>60</sup> Jesus himself offered a countercultural commitment to marriage – significantly raising the bar of the grounds for divorce in his own day (Matthew 19:8–10). Similarly there are strong injunctions for children to obey parents and then later in life to provide for parents (Deuteronomy 21:18–21, 1 Timothy 5:8). The Bible demonstrates a strong commitment to strengthening family commitment and cohesion.

Alongside the strengthening of familial covenant, there is also a very clear call to refuse to allow the boundaries of kith, kin or clan from excluding 'outsiders'. Responsibility

for the care of the alien and the stranger, the widow and the orphan is not outsourced to an anonymous state mechanism, but instead becomes the responsibility of every family (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Hospitality and compassionate self-sacrificial service are expected to be demonstrated to all without distinction. Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan famously demonstrates that traditional ethnic divisions between Jews and Samaritans should not be a barrier for sacrificial hospitality. Someone's ethnicity, marital status and gender are not to be barriers for the showing of love. Indeed the collective term for all those who are not our family is 'neighbours' and even the concept of enemy is relativised (Matthew 5:43-45). Interestingly, Christ's followers are to demonstrate their family likeness to their heavenly Father by loving their enemies. So rather than family being devalued by the inclusion of others, quite the opposite is true: family life is strengthened by having porous boundaries towards the other.

The modern Western nuclear family has generated what often amounts to a 'radioactive' exclusion zone around the family. Outsiders are quarantined from the prized core of the family. The proverbial saying – 'an Englishman's home is his castle' – betrays the strong defences we often feel we need to put up to protect our families. Not only outsiders, but even older generations of the same bloodlines are often excluded. This has not led to stronger families, but rather weaker families starved of the linking and bonding social capital that could offer support to marriage and family life, and denying the family the opportunity to grow in godliness as members seek to mirror God's character to the vulnerable. The wider extended family network that seems to be the norm in biblical history provides the possibilities of intergenerational connectivity. But at the same time, built into the law and prophets of Israel, was a continual reminder to keep the boundaries between family and non-family. Kith and kin were to include the stranger, the orphan, the widow and the vulnerable.

The book of Ruth demonstrates an exemplary interracial marriage, openness to the outsider and corporate and familial responsibility for the vulnerable as well as a very clear link to the prized messianic bloodline. In fact, though

pure Israelite genealogies might have been expected to be highly valued, in Matthew's Gospel, the genealogy of Jesus highlights the inclusion of the other, the outsider, as a central part of its construction. Jesus modelled in his life both a commitment to his family as a single man and yet continually called his followers to include the excluded and marginalised.

## 5. There is a tension between family responsibility and personal responsibility

The book of Proverbs contains strong censure for the sluggard, the lazy and the fool (Proverbs 20:4).<sup>61</sup> These ideas are reiterated in the New Testament where anyone who does not provide for the needs of their family is described as 'worse than an unbeliever' (1 Timothy 5:7-10). But alongside the emphasis on individuals taking personal responsibility for themselves and their family members, the Bible contains oft-repeated and clear calls to generosity (eg 1 John 3:16-18, Luke 12:33-34).

These biblical texts (and others like them) have prompted a range of theological responses to the responsibility of family, state and individual to poverty.

**Prosperity Theology** – this argues that health and material provision are the signs of God's blessing on a faithful life and therefore either explicitly or implicitly argue that poverty is a sign of God's judgement on a sinful life. This can lead to false hope that if one confesses their sins, experiences spiritual renewal or confesses ancestral sin there will be an automatic transformation of a believer's financial situation.

**Undeserving Poor** – these texts have also been co-opted into a polemic that makes a clear and strict demarcation between the 'deserving rich' and the 'undeserving poor'. The assumption is that the poor deserve their lot. If they had only been wiser or more hardworking they would not face their current woes. The problem with this view is that there are many clear examples in the Bible of undeserved poverty. For example: Israel under Egyptian slavery, Job and most notably Jesus himself who said: 'Foxes have holes, birds have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58). The common sense wisdom of the proverbs must be interpreted with

care – avoiding mechanistic and judgemental application – as the radical wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes demonstrate.

**Liberation Theology** – this argues that the primary calling of the church is to challenge and replace unjust structures that lead to oppression and poverty. But without adequate attention to the four-dimensional shalom of God – it seems insufficiently holistic.

**Naïve Paternalism** – unwittingly, many Christians provide well-meaning aid but in a form that actually takes responsibility and dignity away from those that are being ‘helped’. Sadly this may actually exasperate rather than alleviate poverty.<sup>62</sup> For example, the provision of ‘handouts’ can sometimes incentivise rather than discourage those that have a propensity towards laziness creating unhealthy dependency-based relationships. Hence Paul’s stipulation as to who is eligible to be added to the ‘widows list’.

A mature biblical theology of poverty and the family will have to leave room for the following:

1. General principles that encourage diligence and personal responsibility and challenge laziness and shirking, while protecting the vulnerable.
2. Modelling of ways of giving respect and empowering the poor rather than patronising and creating dependency. For example Boaz’s obedience to the Levitical gleaning laws that did not give grain to the widows and strangers but instead gave them access to the farmland and allowed them to gather what they needed for themselves. Encouraging both proximity and dignity to those being helped (Leviticus 19:19).
3. Recognition that systems and structures unfairly disadvantage some so that their circumstances rather than their character have been the predominant cause of their poverty.
4. Recognition that families carry the responsibility to care for their members as well as those that are isolated or excluded from their families.
5. Commitment to sacrificial but informed generosity.

## 6. Family relationships are both strengthened and relativised by the church – and are an eschatological foretaste

The church is more than an event, a gathering, or a place to hear preaching or even to receive the sacraments. The church is also to be a family, the household of God (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Peter 2:17 and 5:9). Christians are described as God’s adopted children, brothers and sisters in Christ, unified by the Spirit who is our bond of peace. Older women are to be like mothers to us, younger women like sisters, older men like fathers and younger men like brothers. The metaphor of the church as family must inform both ecclesiology and praxis. In fact the church family relativises blood ties as we see when Jesus responded to the disciple that informed him that his mother and brothers were at the door:

“‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”.’ Matthew 12:48–50)

Again, when speaking of those who through persecution would be estranged from their families, Jesus argued that the church is to function as a substitute family for those that lose theirs due to persecution (Luke 18:29–30). For some, church has become a provider of religious services, a spectator event or a necessary penance. The church is called to be the community of faith – the household of God.

There can be no place for a Christian practice that idolises or idealises the family. Biological ties are very important but are ultimately secondary to obedience to God. Obedience to God should drive Christians to invest in their families, be faithful to their spouses, and honour their responsibilities both to their relatives and to their neighbours, drawing on the empowering presence of the Spirit and the model of the person of Christ. But if there is ever a choice between obedience to God or family – obedience to God must take priority. Indeed Rodney Clapp has argued: ‘It is a salutary rebuke to the church’s overvaluing of family to remember that Jesus was seen as a family breaker.’<sup>63</sup>



## Conclusion

In this all-too-brief survey of some the key themes of a biblical theology of the family and poverty, we can see that a holistic, non-paternalistic and realistic view of poverty is coupled with a commitment to a strong familial unit that welcomes rather than excludes the marginalised, demonstrating the hospitality, grace and fatherhood of God.





# Child poverty and the vocation of government

Angus Ritchie

## Introduction

In one of their many perceptive observations, the writers of *Yes Minister* give us the ‘politician’s syllogism’

‘Something must be done.  
This is something.  
Therefore we must do this.’<sup>64</sup>

Hasty, ill-considered action is a common political temptation. Long-term processes of transformation are often undermined by the clamour for immediate action. However, the politician’s syllogism reveals another, more corrosive, temptation. The pressure on politicians to ‘do something’ may suggest that citizens should delegate their responsibility for neighbours in need to some abstraction called ‘the government’.

As the preceding chapters have shown, Christians should not see the government as the primary agent of social transformation. Compassion and goodness are nurtured most of all in face-to-face encounters. Such patient and sustained encounters create the possibility of a mutual generosity that reflects and shares the love of God.

## Government: more than a necessary evil

The Bible offers us a definite, if limited, role for government. The Old and New Testaments acknowledge a place for something that goes beyond either the choices of the individual citizen or their purely voluntary associations. The reasons for this are obvious: while face-to-face encounters are of great value, the interaction of human beings will not spontaneously create a just and generous common life. There is a need for a corporate authority. This takes different forms at different times in history, but there is clear biblical warrant for action by some kind of government to address inequalities in wealth and opportunity (most notably in the practice

of the Jubilee Year outlined in Leviticus 25), to prevent injustice and oppression (cf. Psalm 72 and Romans 13), and to create the conditions in which virtue can flourish (cf. 1 Peter 2). The first part of this collection has set out the scale of the challenge and impact of poverty, and it is hard to see how it can be addressed without action by government as well as civil society.

A large part of our need for government and of its attendant dangers, flow from human sinfulness. When power is unequally distributed, we have a tendency to abuse it. Government is both an agent of, and a potential corrective to, such injustice. (This is why biblical authors are often deeply sceptical of earthly rulers.) Yet government is not entirely a response to human sin: some very positive goods cannot be realised by the uncoordinated actions of individuals and voluntary associations. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the National Health Service (NHS), the Monarchy and the Armed Forces are all institutions in which a great many citizens take great pride. None of these organisations could survive on the basis of individual initiative alone, or a purely voluntary giving of time and money. Readers will have different views of each of these institutions, but whatever their theological and political persuasion, very few will deny that at least some of the above are of genuine value.

## Christian thought and practice: two contributions to the wider debate

This discussion of the role of government takes place against a bleak political and economic background. This collection of essays is published at a time of increasing cynicism about politics and politicians; one in which child poverty is growing alarmingly. Mindful of this context, I want to focus on two contributions Christians can make to the wider political debate.

## The language of the 'common good'

Firstly, Christian theology understands politics to be the search for a truly common good. Of course, Christians are not alone in this conception. Many outside the church believe that goodness is something we discover and are transformed by, not simply something we invent.<sup>65</sup> But Christianity (most notably in the social encyclicals of the Catholic Church) has developed a particularly rich account of the 'common good' and its implications for the role of government.<sup>66</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that there are powerful fears about giving religion a significant role in public discourse. Firstly, there is a perception that religious voices will always be 'reactionary' (a term which itself needs some unpacking). Secondly, there is a belief that a public voice for religion will inevitably lead to division and dispute.

The experience of our poorest neighbourhoods tells a different story. In many of these areas, Citizens UK (the national community organising movement) is bringing religious and secular groups together in ways that have clearly benefitted children and families in poverty. The most obvious example is its Living Wage Campaign. Much of the initial impetus for the Living Wage came from east London's churches and mosques and their shared concern for family life. Parents on low incomes, often holding down several different jobs, were being forced to choose between spending time with their children and earning the money they needed to provide for them.

The experience of Citizens UK shows that religious and secular groups can work together in ways that go far beyond a bland tolerance. In securing a Living Wage for thousands of low-income families and creating 'CitySafe Zones' in response to violence against young people, Citizens UK has shown that it is possible to bring faith into public life to benefit to people of all religions and of none. A growing body of research suggests that community organising is not an isolated example. Rather, it is one of many ways in which different faiths and worldviews can interact positively, in the discernment of a common good and the building of a common life.<sup>67</sup>

'Where there is no vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18). Without a deeper language of moral and spiritual value, political discourse loses the capacity to inspire. This lack of vision aggravates the public's alienation from politics. Our current combination of economic austerity and political alienation is very toxic. There is a real danger that moral language will resurface in the most destructive of places, in an attempt to scapegoat and stigmatise those who are most vulnerable in our society.

The constant diet of media stories about 'welfare scroungers' and 'benefit tourists' has led to public perceptions – such as the amount of the welfare budget which goes to unemployed people, and the provision of benefits to asylum-seekers – which are at odds with the sobering reality described in our first three essays. These unrepresentative stories are leading to an increasing tendency to blame the poorest in our society for their plight. This represents a theological as well as a political challenge, for resistance to such scapegoating is at the very heart of Jesus' practice.<sup>68</sup> As Bishop Michael made clear in his essay in this collection, there can be no common good without justice for the poorest. The cross stands at the very heart of Christian thought and practice. It is a constant reminder that it is in generous self-offering, not simply in the pursuit of narrow selfishness, that our individual and our common good is found.

While austerity has intensified the sense of public alienation, we should not imagine that economic recovery will cure us of these ills. Even when Britain was going through a time of relative plenty, there was much concern about the 'brokenness' of our politics and economics. Research by The Children's Society's showed that even in the boom years, economic growth was becoming decoupled from well-being, in part because of the uneven distribution of wealth and the continuing scale of child poverty.<sup>69</sup> Addressing these issues requires action by government, as well as individuals and families. Government can only do this if it has some kind of a 'moral compass' – an orientation to that which is truly good, beyond mere pragmatism or the sectional interests of those who voted for the ruling party (or parties). To make sense of the vocation of government, in times of hardship and of plenty, requires us to recognise the existence of a truly common good.

## The role of civil society

On a Christian understanding, the vocation of government must be defined in terms of the prior vocations of families and communities. This essay has been placed after those of John Milbank and Krish Kandiah to reflect that order of precedence. I now want to address the implications of the Christian vision of civil society for the role of government.

As David Cameron has observed, civil society needs to be treated as ‘the first sector’ and not ‘the third sector,’ with government and market as its servants not its masters.<sup>70</sup> The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats each have particular strands of thought which emphasise the role of civil society. All three strands owe a debt to Christian thought and practice: Labour’s mutualist tradition; ‘compassionate’ or ‘one nation’ Conservatism; and the ‘community politics’ of grassroots Liberalism.<sup>71</sup>

To treat civil society as the ‘first sector’, politicians of all stripes will have to unlearn some ingrained habits. In the early days of the current government, I lost count of the number of times I heard talk of the need for ‘the church’ or ‘civil society’ to ‘step up to the opportunity of the ‘Big Society’. This revealed an unwitting statism, as if the government were the creator of the Big Society. In fact, the Big Society already exists, whatever name we give it. The challenge is not for the church or civil society to ‘step up’ to a new government initiative. Rather, it is for *government* to respond to *civil society*, after listening attentively to its diverse voices and perspectives.

What might this involve? The history of The Children’s Society and of Citizens UK offers us some clues. In both, national movements to tackle poverty grew from local communities. The Children’s Society grew out of the Church of England’s face-to-face engagement with children in need in local parishes. The Society’s founder, Edward Rudolf, was first confronted with the brutal effects of poverty on children through his service as a Sunday school teacher in south London. The work of Citizens UK is likewise founded on very local institutions, and its Living Wage and CitySafe campaigns have grown out of the testimony and the action of local people – children and young people as

well as adults. Later in this collection, Andy Walton and Adam Atkinson describe Citizens UK’s work from the perspective of one east London parish.

It is no coincidence that these organisations, in which local churches play a significant role, seek to give children as well as adults a voice. As I indicated in my introduction, Jesus’ clear teaching is that the perspectives of children and of the poorest in society offer a particular insight into the Kingdom of God. And as the previous essays in this section all emphasised, mutual responsibility and face-to-face interaction are at the heart of the *shalom* for which God has made us. Indeed, they reflect his Triune life of love. For all its sin and brokenness, the daily and weekly worship of the church – our reading of Scripture and our sharing in the Eucharist – constantly recall us to this truth.

The work of The Children’s Society and Citizens UK shows how civil society can be the ‘first’ and not the ‘third sector’. While this work begins with the face-to-face encounter, local engagement and action has generated a demand for governmental intervention. In tackling child poverty, certain goods can only be realised and certain evils tackled in partnership with local and national government.

At least in its rhetoric, the Big Society means something other than the abdication of governmental responsibilities towards those in greatest need. It means placing government at the service of citizens; not only ‘citizens’ as individual voters, but as they come together in voluntary association. On the issue of child poverty, associations such as The Children’s Society and Citizens UK have two very clear messages for politicians. Firstly, when government simply retreats – when it abandons families and children to the unregulated market – the common good is betrayed. (We have already discussed the impact of low pay and excessive working hours on children’s well-being, and the wider culture of increasingly insecure employment is corrosive of family and community life.<sup>72</sup>) Secondly, government needs to intervene with care, in ways that build on the initiative of families and communities.

This implies a continuing governmental role in welfare, social care and education. But it also requires some fundamental changes in the nature of the government's interventions. The state needs to be aware of the ways in which its own actions can damage families and communities.

John Milbank has already indicated how this might affect policies on education, and in particular the importance of supporting education in the family as well as the school. It also has implications for welfare policy. If welfare provision does not build on the way relatives and neighbours already support one another, it can damage these networks of mutual care and responsibility, encouraging instead dependence on an impersonal bureaucracy.

Dench, Gavron and Young's study of *The New East End*<sup>73</sup> offers a detailed analysis of the impact of the welfare state on one part of east London. It is a fascinating study, and looks at the strong networks of mutual support within both Cockney and Bengali families and communities. In one revealing vignette, the first generation of Bengali migrants referred to those receiving welfare benefits as *ranir mehan* and *ranir jamai* (the 'Queen's guest' and 'Queen's son-in-law'), as they interpreted the financial transactions of the UK welfare system through a moral framework of mutual obligation.<sup>74</sup> *The New East End* chronicles the way in which impersonal welfare provision has eroded these traditions of mutual support and responsibility. It reinforces Milbank's argument that cash transfers, though undoubtedly important, are not on their own enough.

Debates about the future shape of the welfare state need to go beyond media anecdote and personal prejudice. There exists a body of research on these issues which is rooted in the life and experience of our poorest neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods – in which The Children's Society and Citizens UK are most active – are places in which an insecure labour market and a decidedly un-mutual welfare system have a profound and damaging impact on family life and children's well-being. When public policy is primarily shaped by party machines, Westminster-

based think-tanks, and media stereotyping, it becomes deaf to the more nuanced realities of life in these communities. This is another reason the voices of civil society need to be listened to with care.

## Conclusion

Christianity offers our wider political discourse something both distinctive (rooted in our faith in and worship of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and yet constructive (open to dialogue and action with those beyond the church's walls). In the midst of growing political alienation and economic stagnation, it needs to be presented with clarity and confidence.

A Christian vision of government – of its vocation and its limits – flows from our wider vision of the life and purpose of humanity under God. It is embedded in our account of the vocations of families and local communities, and above all of the 'true society' which is the Body of Christ.

It is exciting to see politicians of all stripes speaking so warmly of the importance of civil society, and of the role it has to play in tackling growing levels of poverty. Churches and Christian charities need to hold our politicians to these words. We should pray, and give thanks, for those in public life who are sincerely committed to this vision. But we should also be vigilant in comparing their words with the lived realities of our communities. The common good, and especially the good of our poorest children and young people, depends upon this vital work.

# Part 3:

# Practical responses





The Bible is a book that resists abstraction. It speaks of a God who has ‘moved into the neighbourhood’ (John 1:14, *The Message*). It is written about, and to, specific communities – which is why it contains so many hard-to-pronounce names of people and of places.

Because of this, Christian theology must be in constant dialogue with experience. As Bishop Tim indicated in his preface, *The Heart of the Kingdom* is an invitation to exactly such a dialogue; a dialogue that is informed by lived experience and which leads on to common action.

In that spirit, this collection of essays ends with two practical responses. Andy Walton and Adam Atkinson describe St Peter’s Bethnal Green – one of the Contextual Theology Centre’s partner churches in east London. They discuss the ways in which their inner-city parish is responding to the challenges set out in the first part of this book, and how it seeks to embody the vision described in theological essays. Matthew Reed offers a response on behalf of The Children’s Society, at whose initiative this collection has been produced. He sees this as a time of ‘enormous opportunity’ for the church to reshape the national debate. As he indicates, this collection is just one part of The Children’s Society’s engagement with the church, and shows the rich potential for deepening that partnership, for the good of our poorest children and families.

# Responding to child poverty: a parish story

Andy Walton and Adam Atkinson

## Introduction

*'We want to hear and see children in our church again.'*

As we were getting to know the congregation of St Peter's, Bethnal Green – and learning of their vision for the future – this was the comment we heard most often. Like many other churches across the country, the congregation's average age had been creeping up for many years. It wasn't as if there were no children, or they didn't value children in the life of the church. But several years without a Vicar meant that their priority had been keeping the church going – and in consequence, very few children were coming through its doors.

Of course, getting children through the doors is only one way in which a church can reach out to them. But it's indicative of how much our congregation cares about children and young people that it was made a top priority in the new phase of the church's life, when (in 2010), a group of around 20 of us from a larger church a few miles away agreed to come and join in the work at St Peter's, and help the existing congregation realise their vision.

The area is one of giant contradictions. *The Times* described Bethnal Green as the second coolest place to live in the UK – then *The Sunday Times* went one further and said it was in fact the coolest! Columbia Road flower market sits in the heart of our parish and is one of the 'must-see' experiences in London on a Sunday. We have creative, arty, technological and foodie businesses right on our doorstep. Canary Wharf and the City of London loom so large you could almost reach out and touch them, and yet...

Bethnal Green is in the borough of Tower Hamlets, which is the most economically deprived borough in London and the fourth poorest in the country as a whole. In our local ward, 13.9% of adults are long-term

unemployed and 29.7% of people live in overcrowded households. According to the Church Urban Fund, the parish is in the top 1% in terms of the prevalence of child poverty. As a consequence, the descriptions of child poverty in the first section of this collection of essays – of the immediate experience and the impact on life chances – ring very true indeed.

When we began the new chapter in St Peter's life, we wanted to make a dent in some of these depressing figures and to transform the lives which lie behind them. Old and new church members shared the vision of a church in which God's life and love could be experienced in practical, tangible ways. We shared the conviction evident throughout this book – that the church is called to works of mercy and action for justice, as well as being a place where our diverse communities can meet for worship.

## Listening and acting

One of the first things we did was to hold a listening exercise. This was our way of expressing the centrality of face-to-face relationships, and the building of genuine mutuality. The idea was that we wanted to really *know* what the concerns of the local community were, rather than simply presuming – and to work with the community to achieve real and lasting change. In this initial exercise, two inter-related concerns came back to us. The first was that many of our congregation and the wider local community didn't feel safe in parts of the parish. Some of our older members reported this feeling, but young people too said they felt uncomfortable. The second concern was about drug dealing, which occurred virtually on the steps of the church.

In the meantime, the church had joined London Citizens, the Community Organising alliance (part of the national network of Citizens UK). This meant that we were soon in contact with other institutions around us including schools and colleges.

When it became clear that school pupils in our area also had fears about safety, we knew that we needed to act. Once again, we began by listening and building relationships. This time, young people were asked to pinpoint areas where they felt especially threatened on a map. The results showed that they were particularly worried about crossing over one of the main roads in the area of Hackney Road. It emerged that some pupils would take several buses to avoid walking across the road, which was a gang boundary.

Working with local police, the shift pattern of officers was changed, and there was a reduction in crime of a staggering 84%. Our next move was to take some action for ourselves. As one of the civil society institutions in the area, we wanted to help set up a CitySafe zone. An initiative of Citizens UK, CitySafe is a simple scheme in which members of churches, mosques, schools and colleges ask their local shopkeepers to sign up as CitySafe havens, to offer a place of refuge to a young person in trouble and to call the police for assistance.

What better place to do this than the Hackney Road? When pupils from the schools had done an initial visit to the shops, a team from the Church followed up and made the link between congregation and the business. We soon had around 15 businesses signed up (as well as our church). They enjoyed meeting the young people and many seemed pleased to know that the church was looking out for them and for the benefit of the area.

Because we are keeping in touch with these businesses, we know that the havens have been used by young people. This is a concrete outcome, and a sign that there are 'people of peace' within our community (cf. Luke 10:5,6).

This scheme has brought us closer to the local police. Both the Tower Hamlets and Hackney police services are now actively engaging with St Peter's and with other members of the community and are keen to help us spread the message to more of our local schools.

The CitySafe Campaign built relationships and it also built confidence. Local people came to see that meaningful change could happen if they organised together. This led us to engage in a second listening exercise: to identify further issues on which to act. As we listened,

four concerns came up again and again: jobs, housing, money and food. We are now taking action on all four issues.

### 1. Jobs

For many local people, jobs are hard to come by. This is particularly true for our young people. There are no easy answers, of course, but St Peter's is doing what it can. In the long term we hope to make some of the church's premises into a hub for small businesses and social enterprises. Already, our hall has housed one such social enterprise (in which vulnerable women found employment and fellowship making chutney). It became so successful that it has had to move out to a larger space! Through our involvement in London Citizens, we have also become involved in a scheme for young people (called Tech City Stars) which offers apprenticeships in some of the tech-savvy businesses based just down the road in Old Street (the so-called 'Silicon Roundabout').

Through this scheme, business leaders are offering young people in Bethnal Green the chance to become apprentices in one of the world's most exciting industries. They don't need top-notch qualifications, just an aptitude with technology and an attitude for hard work. We're hoping it'll be just the chance that some of them have been looking for.

### 2. Housing

Despite the deprivation in the area, Bethnal Green is now one of London's most sought-after neighbourhoods. As a consequence, much of the social housing is cramped, and much of the private housing is unaffordable. As part of London Citizens, we have secured the capital's first Community Land Trust in another neighbourhood of Tower Hamlets. If this pilot project is successful, we hope that more such Trusts will follow soon – on the site of the Olympic Park (in the neighbouring Borough of Newham) and also here in Bethnal Green.

### 3. Money

Desmond Tutu reminds us that the Christian approach to poverty needs to be both immediate and strategic. 'We need to rescue people from drowning, but also to go upstream and stop whoever is pushing them in.' We've tried to follow that advice – combining works of mercy with action for justice – in helping our neighbours who are drowning in debt.

Firstly, we have offered a practical response. This has involved piloting a money mentoring and debt advice course, open to people from the church and local community. It also teaches other skills such as time management, and we are hoping to expand the number of people making use of the course.

Our second response to the concerns over money has been to help launch one of London Citizens' newest campaigns. Called 'Just Money,' its purpose is to make financial institutions work for local communities like ours. One of the main concerns that has arisen so far has been the proliferation of betting and payday loan shops in places like our local high street, Bethnal Green Road.

We're in the process of planning how we can tackle some of the worst excesses of these parasitic companies - and will be looking to involve people from the congregation in planning how we can bring the change we want to see in our area and others like it around the country. Watch this space...

#### 4. Food

Through our listening exercise, it also became clear that there are families and young people in our community who don't have enough to eat during an average week. We have again tried to tackle this in two different ways. Firstly, we have supported the Tower Hamlets Foodbank with donations from the congregation. Space in the church has also been given over to storing food. We've also helped to create the Hackney Foodbank which, in less than a year, has helped hundreds of local children, families and older people. This crisis support is vital to those in dire need.

Our second response has been to set up a community meal, once per month. Taking place in the church (or in the garden if the weather allows!), we ask people from the congregation to bring enough food with them to share. The intention is to provide too much for one sitting so there is plenty left over for people to box up and use during the week. It's by no means the answer to every food-related problem, but it's a start at making things easier.

This has also been a great way of integrating new members into the church, getting younger and older people to interact over some food and some great conversation. We think

foodbanks are valuable but (for the reasons Sabina Alkire, Angus Ritchie and Bishop Michael stress in their essays) we want to do more than simply make a one-way donation. We want to build relationships, and see what we can do together.

This has been a necessarily brief foray into the practical ways St Peter's is trying to respond to the needs of our community and its young people. It bears out John Milbank's insight that child poverty can only be addressed in the wider context of family and community life - and that the church is uniquely placed to proclaim and embody a different kind of society.

As John Milbank emphasises, it is the quality of the church's common life that generates its capacity to act. Confronted by the scale of need in Bethnal Green, it is tempting to cut some corners. For example, couldn't we cut out the time-consuming 'listening exercises'? After all, you can usually anticipate the kinds of priorities that will emerge - not least by reading the research presented in the first three essays of this book! But the process of listening and of building relationships has been central to creating the capacity for action. It is only by engaging more and more of the congregation and of our neighbours in the conversation - patiently developing relationships, taking small actions which build the capacity and confidence to move on to bigger ones - that we have built the power to make a real impact.

#### Children are today's church!

Engaging our children and young people has been a key part of this process. We believe they are indeed at the heart of the Kingdom - and that they should be included in everything we do. They deserve to be listened to and taken seriously. As Jonathan Bradshaw reminded us, they are not just tomorrow's church, or tomorrow's human beings. They are a vital part of our church and community today.

With this in mind, one of our most important decisions has been to appoint a youth and children's work leader. We did this despite tight resources - and with the help of a grant from the Churches and Communities Fund - because we want to practice what we preach! In the short time he has worked for the church, Bob has led our outreach with young people;

helping them to feel part of the congregation, helping those on the margins feel they have a home in our church and visiting those who aren't comfortable in church at all. Unlike many other youth-work roles, Bob's isn't just focused on the children of the church, or solely focused on young people outside the church. He's doing a bit of both. This feels appropriate at St Peter's because of the complex nature of some of the families and communities in our area. Working with children and young people in Bethnal Green means we'll never be wholly based in the church, and if we're doing youth work authentically, there'll always be a need to be involved with young people whose lives are more complex and precarious than those outside the maelstrom of the inner-city.

Bob is also helping us to audit every bit of our life, inside and outside the church's walls – our worship and governance, pastoral care and community engagement – so that more and more of what we do reflects the fact that children and young people are indeed a vital part of today's church. This has taken us in some surprising directions and challenged some stereotypes. For example, we want to create an environment where children can express themselves, but also one in which they can be still and prayerful before God. We believe silence is a rich treasure for all ages – and that children are short-changed if we don't help them to experience it.

Sabina Alkire and Angus Ritchie have stressed that the Body of Christ needs to combine mutuality with the acknowledgement of different roles and giftings. Adults have a particular duty of nurture and care for children and young people – but we also want to nurture their sense of responsibility and accountability, so that they can give as well as receive. On Sundays at St Peter's, they can be found in the teams which welcome people, read the Bible, lead the music, operate the sound system, and prepare and serve the refreshments.

Krish Kandiah's essay reminded us that the family has a crucial role in helping children and adults to share the life and love of God. Through our small groups, we seek to support parents in their ministry of nurture, and support single people and couples without children in jobs and voluntary roles which help young people. It is important to remember,

and very easy to forget, that a huge amount of Christian ministry occurs outside the formal structures of the church, in the home, the workplace and the community.

If this all sounds like a smoothly planned operation, be assured that hasn't been the reality! We have been surprised by the direction some of our work has gone. Often, we set out to do one thing, but experience then demanded a change of course. For example, having thought we'd mainly be interacting with families with toddlers, we have ended up surprised at how many older children have often walked through the doors of the church without their parents. Their undefended nature has enabled them to come in and to bring their friends with them. To some of them, the church represents an enormous playground – space and adventure when they're often cooped up in small flats with new baby siblings.

All of this flows from a desire to take young people seriously. But even more than that, it flows out of a desire to take Jesus seriously. When we arrived at St Peter's in 2010 and we were told the congregation wanted to see and hear children in church again, they were articulating Jesus' own teaching. All our activity, whether within or outside the walls of the church, is a reflection of His simple command to welcome children, for by doing so we also welcome Him.



# From reflection to action

Matthew Reed

For The Children's Society, theology is never simply an exercise in understanding, nor is it something we 'do' merely to express our partnership with the church, although it does achieve both of these outcomes. For an organisation committed to changing the lives of children for the better, theology must first and foremost be a call to action. As such, any response to this collection of essays from The Children's Society must begin to articulate how we respond in practical terms to the challenges presented in these pages. It will involve identifying opportunities for us and the church to work together to address the issues of child poverty.

These essays contain much in the way both of opportunities and challenges. In this short response I want to raise three issues that struck me.

Angus Ritchie's essay on the vocation of government talks about the difficult issue of moral language and the ease with which sectors of the public have been scapegoated or stigmatised in ways that are both untruthful and unfair. For Christianity, the necessity of truthfulness should be self-evident to the followers of the one who declares himself, in John's Gospel, to be 'the way, the truth and the life.' And yet as Krish Kandiah points out in his essay, Christians have not always been blameless here, on occasion identifying poverty with sinfulness, and implying those who are poor are somehow outside of God's love and grace.

Any Christian notion of what it means to be human must begin with an understanding of the incarnation, and the willingness and desire of God to be identified with humanity in its poverty and powerlessness as a child in a manger. Such an inclusive self-identification of God with those who are among the least of humanity should act as a strong cautionary note to Christians when we find ourselves using language that excludes, rather than

includes people in God's love. Pejorative language that dehumanises and further alienates people, who for reasons of poverty, already feel marginalised, must be rejected in any Christian discourse notwithstanding the substantive deep damage this does to those affected.

In light of this, the first challenge to The Children's Society and to the wider church is how we redeem the language of the public debate on child poverty. How do we change the debate from one that tries to divide people between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', to one that recognises that no child can ever be outside the love of God? Such a change in public rhetoric and public attitudes could change the way individuals, churches, communities and governments respond to issues of child poverty. Changing public attitudes is notoriously difficult and certainly beyond the powers of an organisation like The Children's Society alone. However, it strikes me that this public reframing of the debate on child poverty is something that the church and The Children's Society could work on together. I can't think of a better-placed organisation than the church to speak on a national moral debate like this.

Secondly, I was struck by the repeated refrain across these essays of the notions of reciprocity and responsibility. Christian notions of the Trinity have always had significant implications for how we live in community; with our full humanity only becoming realised in mutual bonds of love and care. Krish Kandiah and John Millbank both speak of the need for reciprocity in the way we relate to children and families in poverty. They call us to move beyond a naive paternalism that treats 'the poor' as objects of our charity to one where they are treated as human beings with dignity and responsibility. Part of their flourishing is about them being actors in their own destiny, working out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

In practical terms, this is a question of co-creativity, of giving the poorest (and in this context, the poorest children) the agency to act for their own interests. Designing practical or public policy interventions that recognise poor children as active participants and not passive recipients will change the way we design our services, develop our research and deliver our campaigns. This too is a challenging ask, but unless we do so, we run the risk of failing to determine the most appropriate practical response and failing to deliver on a theological vision of what it means to be properly human.

Thirdly, these essays challenge us to establish the correct limits for the state and civil society in the flourishing of children. So much of the political debate has fallen between two camps. The first camp sees the retreat of the state as the immoral abdication of its responsibility to citizens, while the second camp sees it as an entirely appropriate reassertion of role of civil society in areas where the government has a responsibility to limit its agency.

Perhaps a more useful way to see the relationship is given in Angus' essay. His account allows the church and other parts of civil society to take on some of the responsibility for alleviating child poverty. But it does not allow the state to abdicate itself of all responsibility. Indeed, the state becomes accountable to wider civil society and is answerable to it. This understanding both legitimises and encourages the democratic function of civil society to campaign and lobby for specific state interventions where it sees the state as the best vehicle for delivering positive outcomes. The vocal interventions of the bishops in the House of Lords and the mass campaigning of the church on issues such as the provision of free school meals become not 'gesture politics' (as they have been inaccurately called), but the proper operation of civil society, as it seeks to hold government to account for delivering a vision of human flourishing.

To pick out only three issues from this collection of essays is to fail to do justice to the riches within these pages. Doubtless additional opportunities and challenges will present themselves as we reflect further and work out a practical response to issues of child poverty. But one thing is clear: the enormous opportunity that the church has to reshape the national debate around child poverty and reclaim the God-given gift for all children to thrive. Is it too much to expect the state to provide the context where that flourishing can happen?

Freed as it is from the parliamentary political cycle, the church can take a longer and more visionary view. And working alongside the church on this bigger vision will present ongoing opportunities to The Children's Society, with which we hope to fully engage.

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27. There are an estimated 120,000 undocumented migrant children in the UK, most of who were born here. Their lack of a regular immigration status means they are at high risk of living in poverty, of becoming destitute, socially excluded and of being exploited. See N. Sigona and V. Hughes. *No Way Out, No Way In: Irregular migrant children and families in the UK*. Oxford: ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, 2012. [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/Reports/NO\\_WAY\\_OUT\\_NO\\_WAY\\_IN\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/Reports/NO_WAY_OUT_NO_WAY_IN_FINAL.pdf)
28. Refugee families will often have spent many years living on asylum support before obtaining refugee status. Home Office data reveals that about 40% of families are on asylum support for over two years and some over 10 years. During this time they would have lived on low income and would not have been allowed to work, becoming deskilled or experiencing difficulties in getting their qualifications recognised. As a result many find it difficult to re-enter the labour market, leading to high levels of unemployment and under-employment.
29. For example, the targets for reducing child poverty set out under the Child Poverty Act 2010 do not take into account asylum-seeking children, those without accommodation or with no fixed abode. See the methodology of the Family Resources Survey used to determine child poverty levels: [http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/income\\_analysis/feb2012/chapter\\_8\\_text.pdf](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/income_analysis/feb2012/chapter_8_text.pdf)
30. Children who are supported with their families by the Home Office under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (for refused asylum seekers) are not entitled to Free School Meals or the Pupil Premium.
31. A briefing from The Children's Society: Highlighting the gap between asylum support and mainstream benefits. The Children's Society, 2012. Available from: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/a\\_briefing\\_from\\_the\\_childrens\\_society\\_on\\_asylum\\_support.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/a_briefing_from_the_childrens_society_on_asylum_support.pdf)
32. See tables on pp30-31 of The Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People (January 2013) for comparative rates. Available from: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/asylum\\_support\\_inquiry\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/asylum_support_inquiry_report_final.pdf)
33. On 6 June 2013, the government announced that there would be no increase to asylum support rates for a second year in a row. See: [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rates-of-asylum-support](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rates-of-asylum-support)
34. The test for destitution set out under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that '...a person is destitute if a) he does not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not his other essential living needs are met); or b) he has adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet his other essential living needs.'
35. In addition to the subsistence payments, the Home Office provides accommodation, some household equipment and covers utility bills for those on asylum support. On mainstream benefits income support is intended to cover the cost of living expenses after housing costs have been paid. If a family needs help with their rent, they may also be entitled to Housing Benefit to cover these costs. For more information on these comparisons see: A briefing from The Children's Society: Highlighting the gap between asylum support and mainstream benefits (op. cit.).
36. Additional support is provided in some cases such as extra payments for children under three and a maternity grant of £250, but this is again lower than for mothers on Section 95 (£300) and those on mainstream benefits (£500).
37. *Mother living on Section 95 support*, Evidence Session 1 for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People 20 November 2012.
38. *Member of the Refugee Women support*, Evidence Session 1, 20 November 2012 (op. cit.)
39. *Parliamentary Questions*, Home Department, Asylum: Finance. 12 Feb 2013. Available from: [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130212/text/130212w0001.htm#130212w0001.htm\\_wqn6](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130212/text/130212w0001.htm#130212w0001.htm_wqn6)
40. Case study submitted by Refugee Action in their written evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support. Available from: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/Policy/asylum-inquiry/refugee\\_action.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/Policy/asylum-inquiry/refugee_action.pdf)
41. *The Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People* (op. cit.)
42. Name has been changed, The Refugee Council, Written Evidence Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Asylum Support for Children and Young People: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/asylum\\_support\\_inquiry\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/asylum_support_inquiry_report_final.pdf)
43. Earl Atlee, quoted in The Telegraph, 14 June 2013.
44. As part of the Queen's Speech 2013, the government published an overview of the forthcoming Immigration Bill, which includes provisions to further limit services to migrants including children and young people. The speech is available here: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/197434/Queens-Speech-2013.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/197434/Queens-Speech-2013.pdf)
45. Charles Dickens. *Bleak House*. First published in London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853.

46. Jim Forrest. Mrs Jellyby and the Domination of Causes. The Orthodox Peace Fellowship (online). (<http://www.incommunion.org/2006/02/19/mrs-jellyby-and-the-domination-of-causes/>) (Accessed 5 June 2013.)
47. Ibid.
48. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981. The Vatican (online). ([www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)) (Accessed 5 June 2013.)
49. Norman H. Baynes. *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies of St. Daniel the Stylite, St. Theodore of Sykeon and St. John the Almsgiver*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977.
50. Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar. *Our Present Duty*. Concluding address to the Anglo-Catholic Congress, 1923.
51. See for example E.M. Howse, *Saints in Politics: "Clapham Sect" and the Growth of Freedom*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1971.
52. Special thanks to Anthony Clarke (Tutor in Pastoral Studies and Community Learning) for his input into this paper.
53. G. J. Wenham. *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1: Genesis 1-15*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987.
54. A. Crouch. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008.
55. L. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (CLS, 1956); F. Schaeffer, F., *Genesis in Space and Time* (Regal Books, 1972); and B. Fikkert & S. Corbett, *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Ourselves* (Moody Press, 2012).
56. In *How happy are our children: measuring children's well-being and exploring economic factors* (The Children's Society, 2013), L. Pople and E. Solomon write: 'In 2007, UNICEF researchers assembled internationally comparable data for 21 industrialised countries to assess six dimensions of children's lives through 40 separate indicators. The majority of these indicators related to existing social, economic and health measures, such as the percentage of children who live in poverty, are born with low birth weight, or are in post-compulsory education. The UNICEF assessment placed the UK at the bottom of the league table. For every dimension except 'health and safety', the UK was in the bottom third of the table. For 'family and peer relationships', behaviours and risks' and 'subjective well-being', the UK came last.'
57. Adapted from T. D. Alexander & B. S. Rosner (ed.), *New dictionary of biblical theology* (electronic edn.). Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
58. For a fuller discussion see R. Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
59. Z. Bauman. *Liquid Love: On the frailty of human bonds*. Bristol: Polity Press, 2003.
60. R. P. Martin & P. H. Davids (ed.). *Dictionary of the later New Testament and its developments* (electronic ed.) Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
61. See also 2 Thessalonians 3:12: 'We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.'
62. See B. Fikkert & S. Corbett, op. cit.
63. R. Clapp, op. cit.
64. The 'politician's syllogism' appears in *Yes, Prime Minister* (by Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn), episode: Power to the People first broadcast on 7 January 1988.
65. See my discussion of the relationship between theism and a commitment to objective goodness in *From Goodness to God* (London: Theos, 2012) and, at greater length, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
66. The teaching of these encyclicals is distilled by the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace in its *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Burnes & Oates, 2005).
67. Cf. Luke Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* and the research generated by University of Notre Dame's Contending Modernities project in east London (<http://theology-centre.org/reflecting>), especially David Barclay, *Making Multiculturalism Work* (London: Theos, 2013).
68. On scapegoating and the practice of Jesus, see especially James Alison, *Raising Abel* (London: SPCK, 2010).
69. See Richard Layard and Judy Dunn, *The Good Childhood Enquiry: Searching for values in a competitive age* (London: Penguin, 2009), especially chapter 8.
70. David Cameron. Foreword to *A Stronger Society: Voluntary action in the 21st Century*. London: Conservative Party Green Paper, 2008.
71. The 'blue Labour' movement – in which John Milbank plays a significant role – has sought to re-emphasise the roots of Labour in mutual associations and guilds, and Labour's 'Movement for Change' seeks to harness the energy of community organising to renew local constituency parties. Within Conservatism, theologian Phillip Blond's *Red Tory: How Left and Right have broken Britain and how we can fix it* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010) and Jesse Norman MP's *The Big Society: Anatomy of the new politics* (Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press, 2010) stress the role of civil society, as opposed to state and market. The Liberal Democrats, and their predecessors in the Liberal Party, have particularly strong roots in the Presbyterianism and Nonconformity of Britain's 'Celtic fringes' – encouraging an emphasis on 'community politics' which goes beyond mere individualism.
72. See also Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1999)
73. G. Dench, K. and M. Young, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict*. London: Profile Books, 2006.
74. Ibid; see pp.103-20 and 209-11.



# Biographies

**Tim Thornton** is Bishop of Truro and Chairman of the Children's Society. He has been ordained for over 30 years and served in parishes and worked in theological education in several different dioceses. He is involved in various local charities and passionate about promoting the gospel and enabling everyone to flourish and thrive. In Cornwall he is engaged in attempting to reshape the church in order to allow it to grow and blossom.

**Angus Ritchie** is the Director of the Contextual Theology Centre in east London. Ordained in 1998, he has always worked in parishes in east London involved in broad-based community organising, and is currently serving at St Peter's, Bethnal Green, London. Angus researches and teaches on faith and social action, and on Christian apologetics.

**Tess Ridge** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bath. Her main research interests are childhood poverty and social exclusion; particularly exploring the experience of poverty and disadvantage from the perspectives of children themselves. Her research includes one of the first UK studies of childhood poverty to be carried out from a child's perspective. Her books include, *Childhood poverty and social exclusion: from a child's perspective* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2002).

**Jonathan Bradshaw** is a Professor of Social Policy at the University of York and Durham University (both part-time). His last book was *The Well-being of Children in the UK* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011). Jonathan is a consultant to UNICEF and has been collaborating with The Children's Society on their surveys of child well-being for the last eight years. He was made CBE for his work on child poverty and is a Fellow of the British Academy.

**Ilona Pinter** is The Children's Society Policy Advisor on asylum and immigration, focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, victims of trafficking and refugee and migrant families. She is also co-chair of the Refugee Children's Consortium – a coalition of over 40 organisations working to promote the rights of refugee children.

**Sabina Alkire** is the Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), based at Queen Elizabeth House in the University of Oxford. She serves as a Church of England priest in the Parish of Cowley St John and at Magdalen College, Oxford and is a Fellow of the Contextual Theology Centre.

**Michael Ipgrave** is Bishop of Woolwich in the Diocese of Southwark. He has previously served as the Inter Faith Relations Adviser to the Archbishops' Council and Secretary of the Churches Commission on Inter Faith Relations. Bishop Michael is a Fellow of the Contextual Theology Centre. In 2011, he was made an OBE for services to inter faith relations.

**John Milbank** is Research Professor of Politics, Religion and Ethics at the University of Nottingham and Director of its Centre of Theology and Philosophy. He is Chairman of the Respublica Trust, and a Fellow of the Contextual Theology Centre. His books include *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) and *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

**Krish Kandiah** is Executive Director for Churches in Mission at the Evangelical Alliance. He heads up the Home for Good campaign, which seeks to challenge the church to find homes for the 4,600 children waiting for adoption and to find the 9,000 additional foster carers needed throughout the UK. Krish is lecturer in Evangelism at Regent's Park College, Oxford and also chairs Tearfund's Theological Panel.

**Andy Walton** is the Communications Officer of the Contextual Theology Centre and its Church-based Community Organiser at St Peter's, Bethnal Green. He is a writer and broadcaster whose publications include *Is there a 'Religious Right' emerging in Britain?* (London: Theos, 2013).

**Adam Atkinson** is the Vicar of St Peter's, Bethnal Green and Senior Tutor at the Contextual Theology Centre. He has worked in business and NGOs on public affairs and at Holy Trinity Brompton, where he ran internships and the midweek groups.

**Matthew Reed** is Chief Executive of The Children's Society, having previously been Chief Executive of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust and a director of Christian Aid. Matthew read Theology at Oxford and following ordination in 1993 was a curate in Birkenhead and a vicar in Marlow.



# Commendations

That children suffer in the midst of plenty is a blot on all civilised society. These essays – written by eminent scholars and practitioners – are designed to help us move from mere sympathy and empty promises to real action aimed at ridding the world of the scourge of child poverty. This book will provide a useful resource to all who are genuinely interested in bringing child poverty to an end.

**Dr Eric A Brown, Administrative Bishop,  
New Testament Church of God  
Chair of Trustees, Citizens UK**

Whether or not a society is just and generous in providing for the needs of its children is a defining quality of its effectiveness. This book gives testimony to, and evidence for, the need to examine our policies in church and state.

**Baroness Kathleen Richardson, President  
of Methodist Conference (1992–1993) &  
Moderator of the Free Churches Council  
(1995–1999)**

This is an impressive group of writers, addressing a crucial theme for the contemporary church and society. The book addresses an issue which both need to attend to with great seriousness.

**The Revd Dr Graham Tomlin, Dean of  
St Mellitus College, London**

This timely guide challenges us to think differently about the disturbing reality of child poverty. Through expert analysis and drawing on the direct testimony of children caught in the poverty trap this book seeks to inspire a relational, civil and profoundly holistic approach. Grounded in a wider account of the common good these authors suggest a renewed Christian vision of the social and political order: one which is capable of seeing child poverty as a reality attached to the deeper crisis – and opportunities for upholding – human value facing this generation.

**Dr Anna Rowlands, Lecturer in Theology and  
Ministry, King's College London**

Children and poverty are two themes which are significant in the accounts of the four Gospels. Here writers from a variety of perspectives and with varied approaches offer stimulating, challenging and helpful suggestions as to both why and how the church today should bring these themes together. This book is offered as a gift to the whole church and the whole church should welcome it as such, but as a gift which rightly demands our theological and practical engagement.

**Revd Anthony Clarke, Tutor in Pastoral  
Studies and Community Learning, Regents  
Park College, Oxford**