

**Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation,**

edited by Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail, London, SCM Press, xxx + 212pp. (pbk) ISBN 9-780334-053248.

**A Faithful Presence: Working Together for the Common Good,** Hilary Russell, SCM Press, vi + 137pp (pbk) ISBN 9-780334-053897

As the first book was published 6 months before the follow-up text I will address this one to begin with. Whenever one reads the term “towards” in the subtitle of a book or article, the impression is of a modest claim for a project that is underway but far from complete. This is certainly appropriate in this case. To present the objective as stimulating a national conversation, however, is far more ambitious, but that is indeed what this volume aspires to. Published in advance of the May 2015 General Election in the UK, it was designed to influence and shape debate beyond faith-based circles. In the event, the pollsters’ predictions of a hung parliament did not materialize, and the Conservative Party gained a small but clear majority. Since then the Labour Party has elected Jeremy Corbyn as its new leader on a wave of an anti-austerity populist vote, and the contours of UK politics have polarized even more than before the election. This is relevant to the project of the book, as one needs to question the trajectory and relevance of its project in the context of this changed external environment. Has Corbyn stolen the “emperors new clothes” and successfully diverted attention away from the Blue Labour and Red Tory advocates of the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) concept of the common good which seems to straddle more of a middle ground? It is too early to tell, but there is a risk that this volume was “of its moment”, and that moment might now have passed. On the other hand, the idea of stimulating a national conversation on matters of opposition policy appears to have taken a hold, and perhaps TCG will have its desired impact? The best way of evaluating the book, therefore, must be on its capacity to contribute to that conversation.

All of this is to say that the project is a worthy one, and that any text which can stimulate debate on current political issues from a faith base is to be welcomed, whatever its particular limitations. So what are the limitations and how well does the book succeed in its stated aim? It is interesting that Baroness Julia Neuberger in her foreword says that she longs for a Volume 2 “to focus on the practical role of religious organizations in righting some of these wrongs” ( Pxiv) and that we now need a practical toolkit to complete the story. The particular story referred to in the early pages of the book is that of David Sheppard and Derek Worlock and their cooperation in the City of Liverpool to bring their denominations together to combat the problems of the 1980s. In their Introduction, the editors argue that this is a legacy which needs to be reclaimed, but point out that much has changed in the meantime, identifying the emergence of the “market state”; the privatization of public services; the IT revolution; heightened individualism and of course awareness

of a looming environmental crisis, as the key factors in this. How do notions of the common good help us against this background? (Pxxv). Here perhaps is the major challenge, not only to the common good tradition, but to all other faith-based approaches to questions of social justice. The story of Sheppard and Worlock then disappears from the text, and it is not so easy to see how and where their legacy can in fact be reclaimed, but theirs was at least a grounding in practical action.

So, an overview of the book in reverse order as I think the more interesting of the 13 chapters come in the early part of the volume. Part 3, Chapters 10-13 go under the heading of "The Market and the Common Good", two of which feel like an apologia for the market economy and only in the final two by Glasman and Longley do we find a more balanced assessment of the subject based on CST. Part 2, "Traditions of the Common Good", Chapters 3-9, contain arguments related to other traditions: Edmund Burke (Chapter 5) for instance; how Evangelicalism has approached the subject (Chapter 7); a Muslim perspective (Chapter 8), and then an attempt to link this to Anglican Social Thought (Chapter 9). Some of these interpretations feel a little forced and don't add a great deal to what intends to be a national conversation.

Rowland's chapter which opens the book addresses directly some of the potential problems of a common good approach. So how might it produce worked-out solutions to current problems? Then the whole concept can feel too generalized and abstract (P5). Rowlands says "it seems that we are currently caught in the difficult tension between our pull towards the absolute necessity of some kind of notion of the common good, and its seeming impossibility". She also draws attention to the fact that the concept has been employed in ways that are patriarchal, racist and imperialist (P6). Her counter to all of this is that "the politics of the common good is plural and spacious" and that we should be proud that faith communities have kept alive this language and alternative institutional practice (P15). The risk is that unless one is already committed to the concept as part of the CST it becomes difficult to imagine quite how it can contribute to the wider debates about social justice. Bradstock in the next chapter sets this in the context of political philosophy and what he calls public reasoning, referring to Sen, Sandel, Plant, Hayek and Rawls, so "to seek the common good is to take pluralism and social difference more seriously than does conventional politics since....it involves addressing these challenges by promoting a more deliberative and participatory politics" (P18). Strange then that there is no reference to Habermas who, even more than Rawls, argues for a deliberative democracy and has, of late, also seen a more positive role for religious traditions. We are still left unclear as to the actual content of the common good and of how it might be applied in practice.

For those of us not already convinced or converted, the most telling section of the whole book comes in Chapter 4 by Esther Reed. She argues that “the common good is not an idea or a thing whose substance may be defined but a set of responsibilities pertaining to a shared project of which all are part” (P58). So it is more like an activity which takes different forms at different times and places. It is not predetermined, “but is about the conditions necessary for the flourishing of all” (P59). In fact “it is more verb than noun, that is, a collaborative project that might look vastly different in one community of culture as compared to another”. I think this accurately describes the major limitation of the concept which is, as Rowlands has already suggested, that it is so generalized and abstract that one can turn it into just about anything one wants to argue for on other grounds - which is pretty much what one encounters in the subsequent chapters. It presupposes agreement on what is both common and good, whereas these are exactly the questions that are deeply contested in a pluralist culture let alone a global context of many faiths and none.

Hilary Russell’s book is, in many ways, a direct response to Neuberger’s challenge to present practical examples of the common good, and, as such, it does a good job at providing case studies that support the wider argument. Russell says that “this present book focuses more upon the ‘together’ dimension, the relationships that can foster or inhibit joint working towards the common good” (P5). Having said that, Chapter 2 returns to a more theoretical introduction with sections on human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity, concluding with the option for the poor. It suggests that applications of the common good will always be controversial as “there will be difficulty in establishing facts; differences of analysis and in interpretation of what is politically feasible and desirable” (P22). Chapter 3 takes us into a discussion of the ecumenical dimension of the debate, both tracking how this has developed over time and also where things stand currently. There are lots of quotes from relevant sources presented in boxes which makes it read more like an extended report. At this point I would have expected some of the case studies to emerge, but, instead, Chapter 4 talks about different levels of involvement, individual, local, church leadership and institutional (P41), and it is not until P50 when we encounter the 2003 report on the work of Faith Groups in the North West (UK), that there is much earthing of the subject matter. The work of the William Temple Foundation, of which Russell is a Council member, is drawn upon to illustrate the concept of spiritual capital (P55). Chapter 5 begins to document the faith based organizations engaged in practical activity: Church Urban Fund; the Near Neighbours projects; Caritas Social Action Network etc. There are helpful examples such as the Places of Welcome project in Birmingham and their five “P”s; place; people; presence; provision and participation (P66). As Russell says, it is often the long-term commitment and faithful presence of faith groups in specific localities that makes a difference. Chapter 6 though takes us back into

theory, drawing upon the work of Giddens (somewhat dated now I would have thought), Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), and then a section on the statistics surrounding poverty and inequality in the UK (Pp89-96). All of this is important and helps to ground the debate. Yet, when it comes to the discussion of the TCG conversation model, things are less obvious: “the language of the common good is very powerful for such discourses, but also the language needs both to reflect the complexity of the topic and the diversity of the participants. It must be suitable for building trust as well as candour” (P104). This I think is the problem as highlighted with the earlier book. How many of the excellent projects referred to depend upon a commitment to or an understanding of “the common good”? Are not most of these pieces of work which happen a result of faith-based response to local need, and which would have happened anyway? Useful as it is to have a label or brand these days, is this concept really the driving force or motivating factor behind these projects? Russell’s book is valuable in its own right as a report upon current and past activities, and I would recommend it rather than the more theoretical text, but both books come across as “preaching to the converted” rather than as convincing contributions to a wider public debate.

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