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# Politics and Vision

*by Duncan B Forrester*

*Where there is no vision the people perish. But what is the nature of vision? Who has responsibility for generating visions? Why do we need them? Where do we find them? How do we assess them? Duncan Forrester looks at these questions and offers some answers ...*

There is profound truth in the familiar, and probably mistranslated, text: "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Proverbs 29.18). The people perish because without vision they are locked in their past and present and incapable of imagining a future that will be better, because they have lost hope. Politics in such a situation becomes mere "business", horse-trading, squabbling about power with little sense of the ends to which power is the means. Gaining and holding on to power become ends in themselves. For vision is what generates purpose for a society. Without vision public life becomes a battle of interests, unconstrained by a larger horizon of meaning; "civil war carried on by other means", to use Alasdair MacIntyre's telling phrase, a civil war in which the prizes all go to the victors, and woe to the losers, the powerless and the vulnerable.

A concern with visions serves to remind Christians that theology is not exclusively engaged with "academic" questions, or with particular problems and policies and ethical conundrums. It is at least as concerned with the visions which provide a horizon of meaning within which a society exists, policies are formulated, actions are taken and vocations are fulfilled. Visions generate and sustain utopias, if you prefer that language. And, as Rubem Alves has suggested, "When utopias are not imagined, ethics is reduced to solving problems

within the established system", and we are at the mercy of an absolutising of a present which is deprived of any eschatological hope. Without vision, people give up seeking a better future, because in the absence of goals social life loses meaning and becomes the arena for unbridled self-interest. A society without vision is petty, selfish and cruel.

Visions have the ability to constrain selfishness and enable altruism, reaching out to the neighbour in love. Visions can open us to God's future and motivate us to seek God's reign. Visions generate hope and disturb and challenge us, especially when we are comfortable or complacent in the present. Indeed, it is usually people who are weak, marginalised and forgotten, despised people and suffering people who generate visions, who respond to visions, who live by visions.

Not all visions are equally good and desirable, of course. The Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe that collapsed more than a decade ago reminded us how a vision in some ways admirable could lead to dehumanising dictatorship, and then decay rapidly, eroded by its own inadequacy. And Hitler's dream of the thousand-year Reich represented a vision that was devastatingly evil. In these recent days of "tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision" (Isaiah 22.5) there are many visions which are exclusive, petty, and even dehumanising. Other visions are simply individual pipe-dreams,

ways of escaping from reality rather than engaging with the coming reign of God. In many situations, as in Northern Ireland, there are powerful polarised and blinkered visions, dominated by bitter and partial memories of the past.

## Many Visions

We are in an age when many visions are on offer, and they are often in contention with one another. Different visions compete for people's allegiance. Christians must today learn how to assess visions, how to discriminate between visions. These are great issues from which academics, mainly theologians and social scientists, have to an amazing extent steered clear for many decades, preferring to concentrate on details rather than the broad picture, on description rather than evaluation. Visions, the kind of visions which generate goals and horizons of meaning, have been left to "visionaries", religious people, fanatics. But others, too, have responsibilities in these matters. At such a time, Christians have a special responsibility to test visions, our own and others. This means that they constantly measure their vision against reality: does it help us to see the world as it is and (even more important, and for Christians, more real) as it might be, more clearly? Does it enable and encourage hopeful, courageous, just and loving behaviour? Does it help us to see evil, oppression,

meanness and injustice for what they are, and respond to them with faithful steadfastness?

The term *social* vision has an important in-built ambiguity. It can mean a vision of the future of a society, or a vision shared by many or most people in a community. Social vision is necessarily incompatible with the kind of individualism so influential today, and also with the common assumption that the best that can be hoped for is some kind of balance of power. Social vision speaks to us of our interdependence, of our accountability to one another and our responsibility for one another. It constrains and disciplines individuals and groups in the pursuit of their interests in the light of a higher and more comprehensive good.

Social vision as *shared* vision has peculiar problems in a modern plural society. How can a sectarian vision, or a vision held by a minority, commend itself to a whole great society as something that can generate goals and give cohesion? Imposed visions quickly destroy freedom and become vicious – so much we must have learned from the last fifty five years in Europe. Pluralism can provide goods we would not wish to lose – openness, and a degree of freedom for all, for instance. But some contemporary supporters of pluralism commend a thoroughly pluralist society which is neither cohesive nor caring, where vision is discounted, perhaps because history is believed to be at an end (Fukuyama), and we have nothing left to hope for.

Modern pluralism thus presents a direct challenge to social vision. For Hayek, as a typical protagonist of pluralism, only small, simple, face-to-face societies are capable of seeking a common goal, of being held together by a shared vision. In large, complex societies a social vision can only be imposed, so that what he calls “teleocratic” societies are inherently and inescapably dictatorial. The “great society” that Hayek desires because it provides the conditions for liberty and prosperity is one in which a multitude of individual and group interests are bound loosely together without any

overarching or constraining notion of the common good, or of a shared vision.

## Balance

The operations of an invisible hand to bring about some kind of balance between competing interests and scattered unanticipated goods makes some kind of moral sense of this pursuit of individual and specific goals as an approximation to society. It rests on an impoverished idea of community as simply an arena of conflicting interests, where the nearest approximation to justice is some kind of equilibrium and the observance of some simple rules of fair dealing. The inadequacy of this abandonment of the need for a shared vision and common goals is neatly demonstrated by the present turmoil in two social institutions which, like many, cannot be fully integrated into the market or regarded as simply arenas for the pursuit of private goods – the criminal justice system and education.

Social vision, even the most forward-looking, is always a reading or a re-reading of the past, and of the narrative canon which presents that past to us – for Christians around the world, the Bible.

As such, social vision may lock us into a wistful and maudlin nostalgia, or it may fuel social conflict by excluding the other from our story and making the past a simple conflict between darkness and light. Social visions can be divisive, demeaning and bitter; let there be no doubt about that. They can make us captives of the past, incapable of responding to the challenges of today or the opportunities of tomorrow. But unless we can possess our past in a proper, realistic and responsible way we will never be able to cope with the future. And without an authentic vision we are hardly likely to be open to the neighbour and alert to the opportunities and responsibilities which lie to hand.

A Christian vision is inescapably social, precisely because all the great images of salvation and of the future in the Christian tradition are models of conviviality, living together in mutual delight and responsibility – the Reign of God, the New Jerusalem, the city, and so on. It is a vision of a community of

neighbours, remembering the expansive and rich content that the Bible gives to the term *neighbour*.

In Britain in the past crises and conflicts acted as catalysts for social vision, and religion usually provided the imagery and the language. Thus Scottish Chartists in the nineteenth century demanding fundamental citizenship rights marched to their meetings bearing Covenanters’ banners and singing metrical psalms! It is my conviction that intellectuals and academics do not often generate social vision. But when vision emerges from situations of conflict, suffering and pain, from the places where vision is renewed, theologians and academics and clergy may articulate and criticise visions; indeed they have a responsibility to do so.

Today in Britain, the Church declines numerically and religious language and symbols seem to many tired, jaded, jejune and esoteric. And yet it was in Edinburgh that Margaret Thatcher chose to deliver her “Sermon on the Mound”, and Tony Blair makes frequent reference to his commitment to Christian Socialism. Are these things perhaps reminders that religious language has not in fact lost its currency, and indeed is not as devalued as is the language of political ideologies?

## Religious Language

Again and again we seem to be driven back to religious language and find even in Britain what Austin Farrer in a notable book on Revelation called “the rebirth of images”. Are the symbols and the narratives of the Bible still capable of serving as vehicles for renewed and lively social visions of conviviality and hope? Can we rescue and renew a shared and hospitable Christian social vision, which is open to the future and generates goals and motivation for the twenty-first century? Can Christianity in today’s Britain criticise and assess the visions on offer? Is Christianity still capable of pointing to a vision of the future which will draw people together in seeking justice, fellowship, truth and human flourishing?

Prophecy is the application of vision to a particular situation.

▶ It demonstrates as it were the cash-value, the relevance of the vision; it earths the vision in what William Blake called “minute particulars”; it makes it operative in a particular situation. Without prophecy it is hardly possible to grasp the vision except as an escapist pipe-dream which has no bearing on the world, vacuous general statements rather than specific demands. True prophecy is disturbing because it challenges the dominant values and the conventional wisdom of the age. We need constantly to unpack the bearing of vision on specifics, for the concrete here means the actual points where people are hurting and the issues that press upon their reality. This is precisely what Martin Luther King did in the midst of the civil rights struggle when he proclaimed: “I have a dream ... every valley shall be exalted, and every hill shall be made low ... we will be free one day.” And more recently in the century now drawing to its close Archbishop Tutu, Oscar Romero and many another have proclaimed their Christian social vision with great courage.

Ultimately, for Christians true vision is the vision of God, and of fellowship in and with the Triune God. And the Church is called to be a kind of preliminary manifestation, or earnest *arrabon* [= down-payment] of that vision. That does not mean that the church or theology, generate or devise the Christian vision. But they have a responsibility to discern it, explore, manifest, and proclaim it. The church and its worship is inherently prophetic, both a witness to the vision and a disturbing challenge to the injustices and untruthfulness of the context in which it is set. But in the New Testament the visions were not visions of the glorious future of the church, but of a new heaven and a new earth, the renewal of the whole world, a New Jerusalem in which there will be no church or temple, but God will be all in all. And we are constantly reminded that judgement begins with the household of faith, the community that nurtures and commends the Christian vision. For we are stewards, not possessors, of the Christian vision. ■