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10 DOWNING STREET
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THE PRIME MINISTER

8 June 1988

My Lord Bishop

Thank you for your letter of 27 May with which you enclosed an open letter following my speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

I made my own views clear in the full text of that speech, which went far wider than the points covered in your open letter. I am enclosing a private letter responding to some of the more specific points which you raised.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Williams

The Right Reverend The Lord Bishop of Gloucester



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

8 June 1988

My Lord Bishop,

Thank you very much for your kind letter of 27 May and the text of the open letter you and Prebendary Gladwin signed, which you expressly say represent the General Synod of the Board of Social Responsibility.

I would like to make the following points in reply to some of those you raise.

First, you refer to doing what is right as well as what is expedient in ordering our common life. Of course. But you cannot make people virtuous by compulsion, only by commitment and choice. That is why I began my talk with the famous words of Dean Inge:

"Christianity is about spiritual redemption not social reform"

From there I went on to point out that most Christians would express their Christianity by helping their fellow men and women and that the family was the unit of society upon which we build our own policies of welfare and care. But I thought Christianity was about a lot more than that. And I went on to give my personal views.

Second, you ask whether the Government accepts its responsibility in the fight against poverty, unemployment, victimisation and distress. But I said in my address:

"In our generation, the only way we can ensure that no-one is left without sustenance, help or opportunity, is to have laws to provide for health and education, pensions for the elderly, succour for the sick and the disabled."

Moreover, no previous Government has spent anything like as much as this one on helping those in need, on general social security and on the Health Service. No less than one-third of total Government spending is on social security alone. This cannot possibly be described as a policy of "giving only the barest minimum".

Although I use the words "Government has spent" - let us remember Government has no funds save what it takes out of the pockets of the people. This year, the average family of four will be paying in taxation £64 a week towards social security, £32 a week to the Health Service and £25 a week to education - all that before the needs of law and order, defence etc are met. These are enormous sums.

But it would be a great mistake for anyone, whether Christian or not, to equate social action with State action. Government intervention is only one of many forms of social action. Between the individual and the State there are and should be, a great variety of voluntary social organisations, not least the churches. All of them have important roles to play in helping the disadvantaged members of our society in specialised and personal ways that no Government could hope to match. This Government strongly believes in such organisations and wishes to further them. This year they have raised many billions of pounds. Indeed, voluntary giving has more than doubled in real terms in the lifetime of this Government.

You will recall that I then went on to say that:

"But intervention by the State must never become so great that it effectively removes personal

responsibility. The same applies to taxation for while you and I would work extremely hard whatever the circumstances, there are undoubtedly some who would not unless the incentive was there.

And we need their efforts too."

It is necessary in my view to repeat that, for there are some people who seem to consider that their duties are discharged by demanding more and more taxation by the State, leaving less and less for personal action and generosity. It is as if the "system" ought to provide - forgetting that the system is none other than your neighbour. I am reminded of the famous T. S. Eliot lines about a society where men are:

"..... Seeking to escape
From the darkness outside and within.
By dreaming of systems so perfect
That no-one will need to be good."

But no system, no law can make us good. We can only try to bring out the best in people. We are each vested with the right to choose which path to take.

Third, you emphasise that wealth creation as well as its use raises moral issues. I agree. Our concern over this issue explains why we as a Government have constantly sought to increase the penalties for those who are found guilty of fraud and have introduced measures to protect the individual whether as customer or investor.

But you go on to say that:

"The Christian tradition has been very wary of wealth because of its effects on people It can be deeply destructive of spiritual experience."

I explicitly acknowledged this in my speech when I said:

"But it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong but the love of money for its own sake."

We all need to keep clearly in mind the distinction between materialism as an end in itself, and wealth as a means to worthwhile ends.

Most of my political life has been spent trying to extend the opportunity to prosper to more and more people. To prosper by using their own talents and abilities through their own work. To that end, we are improving education and training. Now, two-thirds of people own their own homes, everyone now retiring has a second pension, and nine million people now own shares. They are becoming wealthier, they will have something to leave to their children and grandchildren, and they are giving more to good causes. They can choose how to live their lives and what to do with their money. Isn't this also part of our Christian duty, to replace poverty by opportunity leading to plenty? I do not mean plenty just for the ordinary stuff of life: Our Lord did not refuse the precious oil in the alabaster jar although the disciples said that it might have been sold for much and given to the poor. We shall need the resources of all of those who prosper by their own efforts if we are to help others to achieve their destiny in their own way and if we are to conserve those glorious cathedrals and churches whose message has been the inspiration of all that is best in our country.

On the basis of social policy, that is to say the rising personal standard of living, the rising standard of social security and a spread of wealth and of personal giving, I believe that our record will compare favourably with that of any other Government. Our deepest problems now are the real problems of human nature, which is why the greater part of my own address was really saying that secularism is not enough. I am reminded of the way in which one professor summed up

Rousseau's doctrine by commenting that sociology was no substitute for theology.

So you see gentlemen the reason for my final words to the Church Assembly of Scotland:

"When all is said and done, a politician's role is a humble one. I always think that the whole debate about the Church and the State has never yielded anything comparable to that beautiful hymn "I vow to thee my country." It goes on to speak of "another country I heard of long ago" whose King cannot be seen and whose armies cannot be counted, but "soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase." That, members of the Assembly, is the country which you chiefly serve.

You fight your cause under the banner of an historic church.

Your success matters greatly - as much to the temporal as to the spiritual welfare of the nation."

Yours sincerely
Raymond Baxter

The Right Reverend The Lord Bishop of Gloucester



THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Board for Social Responsibility

Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ Telephone: 01-222 9011

29/5/88

Prime Minister²

To see. This was reported in today's 27th May, 1988.
press, I have acknowledged and will let you
have a substantive draft reply for your weekend box.

R27

Dear Mrs. Thatcher, DM 4/6

... I enclose the text of an open letter which the Secretary and I have both signed as representing the General Synod Board for Social Responsibility. We hope that it might be published by one or two of the Church newspapers during this coming week, and I write now merely to express the hope that it will be seen as a genuine contribution to the serious debate about politics and morals, and to assure you that the Board appreciates your own contribution to this debate as a creative move and a hopeful sign for the future of our society.

Yours sincerely,

+ *John Edmunds*

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP.,
10 Downing Street,
London, SW1.



THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Board for Social Responsibility

Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ Telephone: 01-222 9011

27th May, 1988.

Dear Mrs. Thatcher,

The churches will take considerable encouragement from your giving time and thought to matters of Christian faith and contemporary political life in our country. For the Prime Minister to be responding to concerns which have been consistently voiced by the churches is clear evidence that some of the crucial things we have been saying have been heard and pondered by government. May we assure you that we welcome the debate and that we will persist in making our contribution to it. Politics is about what is right, as well as what is expedient, in ordering our common life. Christians have always sought to hold together these principles:-

1. An acceptance of the positive task of government in shaping society and of the church's duty to offer it prayerful though not uncritical support.
2. The desire to set every aspect of human experience in society within moral boundaries consistent with Christian faith.
3. A particular commitment to the poor, the vulnerable and the victims in society.

Your speech in Scotland raises important questions concerning the relationship of the individual to society. None could take exception to your stress on personal responsibility - indeed, all serious social policy should be aimed at enabling people to carry out their obligations more responsibly. But can we understand personal responsibility without stressing also the essentially social character of human life? Individuals are born from relationships and born into families and communities. The social dimension is fundamental and inescapable. Governments, therefore, have clear social and moral obligations. These are to pursue policies which create and encourage that sense of community and mutuality which are the hallmarks of a complete human life. This is why the churches have persistently seemed a nuisance in societies which seem to be casual in their attitude to the poor and distressed. Deep divisions and injustices in society threaten our sense of common life. It is not that we are under any illusion that solutions are easy to come by. Far from it - we all know the hard and difficult road of discipleship inspired by the vision of God and of the future transformation of the world. The question is, do governments accept on behalf of us all in society, a responsibility to play - and be seen to be playing - a crucial and inescapable part in the fight against these enemies of the human, namely poverty, unemployment, victimisation and distress? These matters are not just about what individuals do but also about what governments do or do not do.

Continued ...

Chairman: Rt. Revd. John Yates, Bishop of Gloucester. Secretary: Prebendary John Gladwin



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You went on to raise important questions about wealth creation in our society. Again, none would surely dissent from the proposition that wealth is not evil in itself. It is part of the bounty of God's creation. It is God who is the giver of all good things. Is it enough, however, to describe it as neutral, as though the only moral questions are those concerning what individuals do with this wealth? There is scope here, we believe, for a continuing discussion.

First of all, moral discussion is bound to ask searching questions about how wealth is gained. That people gain their bounty by legal means does not necessarily mean that such means are morally acceptable. Moral discussion will include a serious questioning of the economic system itself. Wealth gained regardless of the welfare of the rest of the community is difficult to justify.

Second, the Christian tradition has been very wary of wealth because of its effects on people. Wealth can hinder people experiencing the Kingdom of God, whilst poverty can threaten people's experience of God's Kingdom through the despair and inhumanity it engenders. Wealth acts as a barrier to the Kingdom if it encourages total self reliance and independence, tempting people to believe they are the masters of their own destiny. It can be deeply destructive of spiritual experience. In one of his sharpest utterances, Jesus warned that it was easier for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

On the question of how wealth is used, we cannot restrict the matters of justice or generosity to personal, individual action. Is it not unrealistic to think that the needs of the poor can be met in our sort of world by individual charity alone? Indeed, to leave the poor dependent on the charity of others threatens their dignity. Moreover, if we accept that governments have a crucial role in providing for those members of society who are in need, it cannot be the case that we should encourage generosity by individuals at one and the same time as government works on a policy of giving only the barest minimum. Justice and generosity apply to governments as well. In our own society, government has a duty to set the tone and to resist the popular myth that the poor are feckless people who might be tempted to greed or laziness if we give them too much. Social policy as well as individual action should be aimed at restoring people's dignity and the possibility of their participating fully and freely on an equal basis with all other members of society.

The churches are not among those who are likely to make cheap comments when Prime Ministers enter the field of serious Christian debate about matters of principle. We are glad you have offered a contribution to these issues and in a way which invites public responses. We hope this debate will continue and that you will yourself continue to engage with us in it. May we assure you of our continued prayers for yourself and the Government in the heavy responsibilities which you carry at this time?

Yours sincerely,

+ *John G. ...*

John Gledhill