

PRIME MINISTER

Speech to Church of Scotland General Assembly

Rather late in the day, you may nevertheless like to see the attached transcript - which has only just come in to my hands - of a radio interview given a week after your speech by **Professor T F Torrance**, the very distinguished Scottish divine. Now retired, he was for over 25 years Professor of Christian Dogmatics at Edinburgh University and Moderator of the General Assembly in 1977.

Lord Mackay tells me he has received from his Scottish friends expressions of sincere appreciation of what you said, Professor Torrance being among them.

30 June 1988

by Professor TF Torrance

Broadcast Reflections on the Prime Minister's Address to the General Assembly - Interview by Trevor Barnes recorded on May 27, 1988

(slightly revised form of the truncated version broadcast from BBC 3 on Sunday morning, May 29.)

TFT: It was a very brave speech, courteously and humbly put forward, in which she gave her personal testimony about faith in Jesus Christ, and made that the centre of everything she wanted to say.

TB: And yet critics have said that the emphasis on self-reliance was made at the expense of the community of Christian fellowship.

TFT: She did stress the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition regarding the structure of the family, for it is from that family structure that human fellowship derives. But I grant you, she wanted to redress the balance a little against oppressive collectivism. And she stressed virtues for which Scotland is actually famous, self-reliance and responsibility. The point she made was this: if you detach the fruits of Christianity, which have to do with social reform and human life, health, education and so on, if you detach those from their roots, they wither away. So she was challenging the General Assembly to put Christ and the Gospel, and especially the Cross of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ, back in the centre, because that is the only foundation upon which true responsibility, true love of our neighbour, can be developed. On that ground people have then to think out for themselves how our love of God and of one another are to be worked out in society.

TB: And yet other people were rather troubled by what appeared to be a stress upon the acquisition of personal wealth, albeit for charitable giving later on.

TFT: No, that would be a misunderstanding. What she really did, as you see from the biblical language she used (taken from the twenty-fifth chapter of St Matthew), was to refer people back to the parables of the pounds and the talents in which Jesus spoke of a person who was given five talents and was then called to give an account of what he had done with them. Those who had gained other talents were commended by our Lord, but the person who did not make any gain was thrust out as an unprofitable servant. And then Jesus said something far stricter than Margaret Thatcher, "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away what he hath." The Prime Minister did not go that length!

TB: And yet many people have seen that this emphasis on the acquisition of wealth in order to facilitate charitable giving is relying too heavily on the goodness of human nature. In a fallen world isn't it naive to assume that people who are given more will be any less selfish than they are fallen to be, as it

were?

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TFTY: But remember, that is the argument that fascists and totalitarians have taken: you have to impose policies upon society because people are greedy and selfish. That is exactly what I found happening in the nineteen thirties when I studied in Nazi Germany. The Prime Minister rejects those forms of national socialism. But in view of the carping criticism about her not taking seriously the selfishness and greed of people, it must be pointed out that in fact she attacked covetousness and the love of money.

TE: Now if the speech was in your own terms theologically balanced, why do you think it should have attracted so much antagonism?

TFT: Well, you see, we have, unfortunately, been going through a period in which people are so obsessed with moral and social issues that Christ himself has been ousted from the centre. And when Margaret Thatcher pointed directly to the heart of the Gospel, to Christ and his Cross, they reacted to that as an attack upon the very basis of their ideologised notions of Christianity. And so we had from the Prime Minister's critics a great deal of moral and pharisaical complaining about public issues. She was certainly, as I said earlier on, trying to redress the balance against an oppressive collectivism...

TE: But what some people call "collectivism" others call "sharing".

TFT: No, you see "collectivism" is the point you made when the State imposes certain patterns of social behaviour upon people because they think they are not good enough. Now it is that oppressive collectivism that she is rightly opposed to, and which she challenged from the heart of our Judaic-Christian tradition. That's why she stressed the freedom and responsibility that come from our creation in the image of God, and the love of our neighbour that derives from the love of God, and flows out of the sacrifice of Christ.