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A New Beginning in Christian Social Theory

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Alan Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective*. (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1979).

Alan Storkey's *A Christian Social Perspective* fills out the framework for a Christian approach to sociology outlined in David Lyon's *Christians and Sociology*, 1975. These two works by two leading members of Britain's Ilkley Group of Christians in Sociology give clear evidence of a renewal of Christian social thought in evangelical circles. And readers of *Anakainosis* will find in the contributions of the Ilkley Group, now representing a substantial stream of books and publications, a serious, self-conscious challenge for the reformation of social thought on a Biblical basis.

In *Faith and Thought* (Volume 106, Nos. 2-3), the Journal of the Victoria Institute, London--also known as the Philosophical Society of Great Britain--an entire issue has been set aside for papers and reviews by members of the Ilkley Group. Contributors include J.A. Walter, Howard H. Davis, Lyon, Storkey, Nick Isbister, Keith White and Philip and Miriam Sampson. Not only do we get practical essays on Christian approaches to social welfare but also critical and systematic articles--which of necessity have to be brief--on social philosophy and social issues. Lyon and Isbister carefully review Donald MacKay's *Human Science and Human Dignity* and Walter reviews another recent IVP publication, *Patterns in History*, by David Bebbington (reviewed in *Anakainosis* II:iv, June 1980). The Ilkley Group also cooperatively produced an annotated bibliography "Sociology and Christianity." I mention these publications--there are others--because it all adds up to a significant development in English-speaking evangelical social thought*

*The Victoria Institute, 29 Queen Street, London EC4R 1BH England. The bibliography is available for 50p. from UCCF Associates, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP England. The Ilkley Group, c/o 8-26 Crescent Road, South Woodford, London E18 IJB England.

As is to be expected, there are differences in approach among the group. Storkey, for instance, locates his argument in close proximity to the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd; Lyon seems more interested in forging a Christian social theory working with a Christian worldview from within the complexities of humanistic sociology taking full cognizance of its genuine insights and dialectical tensions. J.A. Walter expresses his indebtedness to the "social construction of reality perspective" of Peter Berger and the insights of Jacques Ellul (see his book *A Long Way from Home: a sociological exploration of contemporary idolatry*, Paternoster, 1979). John Gladwin even argues in one place that Christian schools and other Christian organizations are isolationist (see

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pp. 16-17 in *God's People in God's World*, IVP, 1979). All these differences notwithstanding--and there are good reasons for suggesting that they are not minor--the contributions of the Ilkley Group constitute a considerable achievement and should be given serious attention by the readers of this newsletter.

Some time ago a friend of mine who had recently graduated and who had been enthused with the prospect of Christian scholarly investigation after studying Dooyeweerd, lamented the apathy he found for such endeavour among the leadership of the local university Christian fellowship. His spirits buoyed, however, when someone else, who had thought a lot about the problem, suggested that it was only a matter of time. Sooner or later the local fellowship would be alive with the cry: "All of life is religion!" The publications associated with the Ilkley Group confirm that prediction. The significance of these new trends in evangelical publishing from Britain should not be underestimated, particularly in Australia and New Zealand.

Sooner or later "reformational philosophy" will lose its obscure aura among evangelicals, and will find a niche. How will reformational scholarship picture itself if Dooyeweerd becomes orthodoxy for evangelical students in English-speaking countries? Even when a communal intention to promote Christian scholarship is established, there still remains an important reformational scholarly task--the work has just begun. Also, a thorough, systematic and self-critical exposure of those accommodative tendencies which attack the heart of Christian scholarly enterprise is still required. It must be an on-going self-criticism. Truly reformational scholarship should seek to stimulate such self-criticism, heeding S.U. Zuidema's prophetic warning against making the *wijsbegeerte der wetsidee* (the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea) into an idolatrous

point of departure (*Communication and Confrontation*, 1972, pp. 124-125).

According to Karl Marx, and quoted by David Lyon in *Karl Marx: a Christian appreciation*, "Every beginning is difficult." Here I attempt the difficult task of raising a few methodological questions about Storkey's *A Christian Social Perspective*, and in so doing contribute to his "new beginning" in Christian social theory. Though the book, by its sheer magnitude and scope, presents the reviewer with a considerable task, I wish to limit my review to comments pertaining to Storkey's historical analysis, his utilization of Dooyeweerd's philosophy and social philosophy, and his view of the place of church in society.

The book is constructed on the grand scale. Chapter Two attempts to draw an overall map of the theoretical options on the sociological terrain. Chapters One and Three to Five attempt to synthesize an alternative theory in the context of the history of social theory. It also is similar in many ways to "introductory textbooks for stage one university sociology courses" seeking to fashion a practical perspective on the wide breadth of contemporary social problems (see "Primary Sociology," Chapters 6-10 and "Secondary Aspects," Chapters 11-15). But Storkey's underlying intention sets his work apart from the prevailing university ethos of humanistic sociology. Storkey clearly argues that the contemporary options within the realm of social theory are humanistic options which can be traced to the Enlightenment

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(pp. 24-33). In setting forth his alternative Christian theory he seeks to locate it historically in line with the worldview of the Reformation: creation, fall and redemption (pp. 15-51). And in his analysis of contemporary British society and the attendant social problems, he is concerned to confront dichotomous nature-grace thinking among evangelicals with the integral perspective of sphere sovereignty derived from Abraham Kuyper (p. 141).

Storkey pictures the development of British Christianity as the battle between the Reformation (pp. 18-24) and the Enlightenment (pp. 24-33). But what I find lacking in his historical discussion is an incisive discussion of the differences amongst those whom he lines up on the side of the Reformation and for that matter why Christians could be supporters of the Enlightenment. He gives the reader little indication of why the Puritan contribution declined, and why the Enlightenment posed such a threat to the Christianity of those who stood (and stand) in and for the Puritan tradition. Whereas the Puritans of the earlier period "found no difficulty in applying the

condemnations of the prophets to similar situations in their society" (p. 23), their heirs were subsequently incorporated into, or swept aside by, the onward march of humanistic thought and action. Did they succumb to a method like John Locke who, according to Storkey, argued for Christianity with reason as his final arbiter (p. 25)?

A general historical framework of Reformation-versus-Enlightenment can lead to problems in our account of movements and countermovements and of individual historical cases. For instance, how are we to account for the stand of Thomas Cartwright, the Anglican divine, who in his writings sided with and quoted Calvin against the Puritans? (See Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in G.E. Duffield's edition, *John Calvin*, Sutton Courtenay, 1966.) How do we account for the continuing contribution of Catholicism--in either its Roman or Anglo varieties? Again, how do we account for Locke's defence of Christianity? Surely here is another form of British Christianity, which has had a not inconsiderable influence and which needs to be taken into account in its own right, even if it is radically mistaken?

But there may be an historiographical method in Storkey's utilization of such an historical backdrop. With this general framework for the history of British Christianity since the Reformation, Storkey has a convenient "benchmark" against which to analyze the variations manifested by and in subsequent historical developments. Though he does not embark upon an extensive historical survey himself, he does not rule out the possibility or desirability of further historical investigation of the individual differences among the Puritans. For his immediate purposes, however, he does ascribe a certain "consensus" to the Puritans by referring to the basic theme of the Biblical worldview: creation, fall and redemption. In this way he accounts for some broad structural developments in 16th and 17th century British society.

Subsequent historical investigation in this context will be concerned with accounting for the variability within the overall social context. Storkey acknowledges in passing the importance of the Restoration, the eclipse of the Puritan style of worship and the exclusion of nonconformists from education and politics (p. 24). Though he does not explicitly endorse a Puritan-Calvinist equation, his method does assume

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that the differences, if any, are a matter of historical variations on one basic theme. These are significant for the investigations of academic historians perhaps, but hardly relevant for those who

wish to work with a Christian social perspective in the concrete push-and-pull of social action.

I realize that Storkey's primary qualifications are in economics and social science and I may well be imputing to him a self-conscious historiographical method which he has not fully thought through. But as he points out, theoretical arguments are based on pre-theoretical assumptions. Here I have pointed out the assumptions which appear implicit in Storkey's historical backdrop, assumptions which must, in some ways, undergird the subsequent social analysis. Storkey does not give an incisive account of the different approaches to social organization found among the Christians he lines up on the side of the Reformation.

It seems to me that in ascribing a "consensus" to the Puritans, Storkey is avoiding some very important differences among Christians pertaining to political witness in the public realm of British life, differences which must reflect different denominational traditions. In this context it must be noted that Storkey devotes Chapter 15 to the institutional church. But whereas in his analysis of the state and economics Storkey gives some practical suggestions as to how Christians should act in and view these spheres, suggestions for the church sphere are very limited. Is it sufficient simply to assert that, rather than idolizing the church, Christians should recognize the rule of God in all spheres of life? How are we now to recognize and act upon the rule of God in the sphere of the institutional church if it is in such a state of anti-normative decay? How are Christians to take their membership in the church with Christian seriousness? In avoiding incisive critique and suggestion in this sphere, *A Christian Social Perspective* could easily be read as support for an "independent-evangelical" tradition and its contra-institutional view of the church.

Indeed, Storkey writes:

That the institutional churches have allowed themselves to become culture bound and fixed in institutional patterns, which are the result of normal sinful motives (emphasis added - BCW) has been evident for many decades. Perhaps the weaknesses of the church are now so evident that the trust in institutional power and influence will decay, and be replaced by trust in the power of the gospel and of God. (p. 400)

In ascribing a "consensus" to the Puritans and avoiding the contentious issue of the church in the way I have outlined, Storkey's argument also seems to support the sect-type--to use Troeltsch's term--in the historical unfolding of Christianity. It is noteworthy that Storkey refers to "the New Testament church" in a way similar to Troeltsch (pp. 380-383).

G.C. Berkouwer, and Herman Dooyeweerd himself, have noted the importance of Troeltsch for understanding Dooyeweerd's theoretical development. Dooyeweerd's response to "ideal-type" sociology and the importance of Troeltsch in the history of reformational philosophy are issues easily

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lost to sight when adherents of Dooyeweerd's philosophy seek to show the relevance of Christian scholarly insights for all of life. But perhaps an appreciation of the place of the philosophy of the cosmomic idea in its historical context would have enabled Storkey to give a much sharper presentation.

This brings me to another aspect of Storkey's philosophical approach to sociology: his utilization of the philosophy of Dooyeweerd. After having outlined his Christian ground principles (Chapters One to Five), the narrative is then divided into what Storkey call "Primary Sociology" (Chapters Six to Ten) and "Secondary Sociology" (Chapters Eleven to Fifteen). His reason for organizing his material thus remains unclear until it is realized that this is part of his attempt to make use of Dooyeweerd's social philosophy (p. 134). We are told that Primary and secondary do not mean more or less important, but rather that primary sociology is the core concerned with "free relationships," "non-institutional structures," the relationships of personal influence. Secondary sociology is the analysis of social areas where the primary concern is not social but "extra-social."

Primary sociology deals with community and class, marriage, family and the mass media. Secondary sociology includes Storkey's discussion of British party politics, the state, economics and the church. The focus of sociology is societal interaction. Primary sociology studies social interaction in realms where social interaction and its norms are the focus. Secondary sociology studies the realms of social interaction where non-social norms predominate.

In my opinion, the division into primary and secondary sociology casts some doubt on Storkey's attempt to utilize the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. The resemblance to a private/public kind of classification system seems apparent. Dooyeweerd did not rule out the possibility of studying all social institutions from the aspect of societal intercourse (*Philosophia Reformata* 41e, 1976, 1 & 2, pp. 3-4). Would not the primary/secondary distinction also have a place in economics, political studies, legal theory and ecclesiastical studies? Is it not also possible to study Storkey's "primary groups" from an "extra-social" standpoint? We need further systematic

discussion from him on these points.

As it stands, and without further explication from Storkey, his approach appears to lead him to the view that the analysis of the aspect of societal intercourse is the same as an analysis of free relationships of a non-organized inter-personal kind. But is there not a primary sociological problem in explaining how organizations (church, state, business) form, influence and direct the inter-personal relationships which emerge in their own spheres? Or conversely, there is the influence of community, class, friendship, marriage and family in the state, in business life and in the church. Perhaps it is just these complex interweavings of social influence that Storkey wants to highlight by his primary/secondary distinction, yet at the very least, further discussion of these interweavings-in-their-own-right is needed. Chapters Eleven to Sixteen on the Secondary Aspects do not attempt to do this. Rather, Storkey is outlining broad principles for Christian social action. We require the exposition of those principles in relation to current social issues, but we also badly need careful systematic theoretical analysis of societal interweaving, complexity and

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subtlety if the assertion of principle in social theory is to overcome the appearance of simplistic panacea. Dooyeweerd's highly relevant discussion of "enkapsis" in *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Volume III, does not seem to have been taken into account.

A Christian Social Perspective is worthy of careful consideration. Among other things, Storkey presents a well-needed challenge. The criticisms I make above are very much directed to certain directions Storkey appears to be taking in his historical method, in his sociological theory and in his view of the place of the church in its social setting. We can look forward to further work from the pen of Alan Storkey, where he clarifies his position on these issues. We hope we do not have to wait too long.

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