

A review of John Sentamu, ed., *On Rock or Sand? Firm Foundations for Britain's Future* (SPCK, 2015).

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The advent of fixed-term Parliaments has made planning publications to match the electoral cycle easier. In recent weeks, the [Church of England](#), the [Roman Catholic bishops](#), and [Churches Together](#) have all produced documents suggesting, at varying length, what factors Christians should consider when deciding for whom to cast their vote on May 7.

The Archbishop of York's edited volume, *On Rock or Sand?* aims to be more foundational: what type of vision should we have for the future? On what bases should British society be built? Archbishop Sentamu is to be thanked for sticking his head above the parapet, for, as contributor Sir Philip Mawer notes:

It is a brave archbishop who at any point produces, or who contributes to a book about, the values that should underpin our future society, and especially so in the year of a general election. Brave because such a project immediately invites criticism from secularists who object to faith occupying anything other than the private part of our life and from politicians and commentators who sense in what is written support for the views of their opponents (213).

And it was so. At the news conference to launch the book, the Archbishop was accused of, in effect, telling people to vote Labour. This view of the book gains traction because the authors are concerned with the excessive individualism that they see as defining current British society, compared with concern for the common good and with solidarity between people (the way that several of the authors cash out the command, re-iterated by Jesus, to love one's neighbour as oneself). As 'neighbour' includes the marginalised (the widow, orphan and sojourner of Scripture), Christian concern should be solidarity with these people. But the solutions (or policies) suggested are not all prerogatives of the state – not surprisingly, the role of the church and other institutions of civil society is seen as important. The limits of what the state can achieve in the fields of education, health and poverty-reduction are recognised; here, the vision of solidarity is closer to a Big Society vision rather than a Statist one.

The papers which comprise this book were produced as a result of a set of meetings the Archbishop convened from 2010 onwards, comprising a group of academics and practitioners who were invited to bring their expertise to bear on thinking about both 'the policies by which our society and our economy should be governed' and the principles and virtues that underlie should those policies (xiii). In the Archbishop's mind, the collection is a kind of health-check on the current state of Britain, 'to discover whether she has firm foundations on which to build for the future' (xiv). The title of the collection alludes, of course, to Jesus' story of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24-27 and

Luke 6:46-49). Archbishop Sentamu writes that ‘Both builders wanted to build; both no doubt built well – houses that looked good and sturdy in themselves. But only the house whose foundations were firm could withstand the storms of life’ (25).

The book challenges the unspoken but real consensus that we should live in a society built on individualistic consumerism as the *sumum bonum*. Instead, the Archbishop suggests building on the foundational principles advanced by William Temple in *Christianity and Social Order* (1942). He refers back to Temple’s principles in the last chapter, quoting at length Temple’s views on freedom (by which Temple means giving every person the respect they deserve as children of God, which requires allowing for the exercise of the powers and qualities of each); fellowship (the recognition that we are interdependent); and service (demonstrated non-exclusive concern for family and the nation).

Traditionally, producing the conditions necessary for all to flourish and live in a state of shalom, which is part of the common good, has been the preserve of the state. Because ‘common good’ came to be associated with whatever the king (or ruling elite) took it to be, both the Protestant Reformers and the Enlightenment humanists looked for alternative formulations (such as common, or public, interests, or common wealth) for the idea. In his introductory chapter Archbishop Sentamu uses the phrase ‘common profit’ (derived from St. John Chrysostom), which he rather confusingly equates with the *eudaimonia* (blessedness) of a community. By contrast, the Archbishop of Canterbury has no such qualms, entitling his contribution ‘Building the Common Good’, but he also stresses that those responsible for building it include more than just those in power at Westminster. And, in his conclusion, Archbishop Sentamu reverts to the older term.

If Temple’s foundation is still a firm one, what do freedom, fellowship and service look like today? The book’s expert chapters address the British economy, education, poverty, work, health, ageing, and the state of the democratic system. In terms of the factual information there is not a lot that cannot easily be found elsewhere: Andrew Adonis’ contribution on education and employment is reprinted from a Rowntree Foundation collection; and much of the material on contemporary British society is well-documented in the mainstream secular literature. Everyone believes that education and health are good, that poverty isn’t; that meaningful employment as part of a well-lived life is desirable, that we don’t treat the elderly very well, and that politicians and businesspeople should behave more ethically. Most would also agree that something needs to be done to increase engagement with and input into the political process. It could be argued that contemporary society has caught these ideas from the church; or perhaps that society has tamed the church and got it to go along with its values.

For some readers, the information in the chapters will provide accessible summaries of some of the major issues facing contemporary Britain. But more importantly, given Archbishop Sentamu’s goal, the collection has something special to contribute in developing Temple’s ideas, or using material explicitly from Scripture to produce a rationale for the principles and policies the authors present. In the introduction, Archbishop Sentamu lauds the reforms that Richard Tawney, Temple and William

Beveridge were instrumental in contributing to in the years following World War Two: the Welfare State, universal secondary education and the National Health Service, ‘the apogee of a shared vision for Britain in the last century’ (22). But for the Archbishop, ‘and I’m sure for many others, a major concern is the extent to which the social compact which the Welfare State represented is now under threat’ (22).

It is a truism of all edited volumes that there is a certain unevenness. Adonis’ chapter make no mention of theology. Andrew Sentence articulates three principles to guide the economy (sustainable growth, shared prosperity, and responsible business) which are bolstered by references to Scripture. Julia Unwin draws from what she sees as an implicit social contract to argue for the enactment of a Living Wage to counteract poverty, for which she claims Christian roots. As Genesis 2 makes clear, one of humankind’s ends is to be found in the work of caring for God’s world. Oliver O’Donovan’s meditation on the nature of work is helpful here: as technology has removed the need for certain kinds of toilsome labour, and work has become recognised as important for self-fulfillment, which is perhaps closer to the creational norm established prior to the Fall.

As Archbishop Welby recognises, Catholic Social Teaching (the corpus of material starting with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891) is a rich resource on which Anglicans can draw. For Anglicans, the formative figures, in addition to the Sentamu trinity of Beveridge, Temple and Tawney, include William Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry (both concerned with the dignity of human beings and the need for a caring Christian society to be concerned about slavery and the plight of prisoners), and Nye Bevan, who piloted the legislation to set up the National Health Service. For these people, their Christian faith was a motivator for providing the type of society in which human beings can flourish.

But where to go next, in the early decades of the twenty-first century? CST has gradually expanded the circle of concern beyond labour relations to be concerned about poor countries and economic development, the debt crisis and (latterly) environmental concerns. Unfortunately, *On Rock or Sand?* does not discuss these issues, with such key election issues as addressing climate change and the UK’s relationship with the EU largely ignored.

In the penultimate chapter, Mawer provides perhaps the best summary of what the book’s message is. Using the framework of the theological virtues, he discusses the contributions in terms of faith in politics, hope for justice, and love in solidarity, seeking to encapsulate the main arguments of the experts’ chapters. Restoring the electorate’s trust in those it chooses to place into office matters for a functioning democracy (as Ruth Fox’s chapter stresses) – although we shouldn’t place our final trust in our rulers rather than God (Psalm 146:3), we should certainly pray for them (I Tim. 2:2) and select capable and godly rulers (Ex. 18:21) who will rule in the fear of the Lord (2 Sam. 23:3-4): Mawer argues for a value-based politics, which in effect reiterates Temple’s ideas. Building on this, he claims that for political leaders the primary task ‘is to sustain hope – hope for justice including the possibility of a better life’ – which serve the common good by bringing about a just society. This would mean, for example, a society that would seek to

reduce inequality and the cycles of economic volatility that have produced poverty and lack of opportunity. Finally, love of neighbour means standing with our fellow human beings – a concern about their welfare and the effects of policy on them. But we need more than just ‘all these nice, platitudinous and vague phrases’ (231) but a concern that generates policy proposals in areas that need to be addressed; the expert chapters give some indication of what types of policy proposals might be beneficial. Politicians of any party who are able to work in this direction should enjoy our support.

So: does the book provide a vision for society in the twenty-first century? Yes, in that it lays out what a government concerned with the values expressed in it should aim to do. Is it a uniquely Christian vision? No – but in a secularised society, it is one to which most Christians, and many non-Christians (‘people of good will’) can adhere. In which case, do we need the God-talk or sprinkling of Scriptural quotations, or are these just bolt-on extras to try to shore up Christian support for a vision emanating from elsewhere, a sort of faith-washing of a liberal consensus? The best papers exhibit an integrated expression of how Christian faith relates to the area of life under consideration; and the authors of the rest would doubtless claim that their ideas and policy prescriptions are informed by their faith commitments. In as far as readers are persuaded that the foundation of the common good is one on which state policy should build, and that a Christian perspective can inform debate over the nature of that common good, then they will be persuaded that the Archbishop is building on the rock of Scripture, and not the shifting sands of politics.