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The Church of England is barking up the wrong tree [1]

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As a member of the Church of England I have been appalled by the stance that the Church takes towards the role of the state, attitudes which have been brought into sharp relief by recent events. The rights and wrongs of the Church?s particular actions over the protest camp at St Paul?s are too complex and, frankly, farcical to rehearse here. The Church?s response to the protesters ? whilst ambiguous in some respects ? has exhibited two consistent features (i) a scepticism towards capitalism and (ii) a high degree of support for state intervention in markets and provision of welfare.

The CofE ? or at least its leadership ? has exhibited the same sort of confused attitudes [3] towards ?capitalism? that the protesters share. There is a deep contradiction at the heart of this mode of thinking. Classical liberals would argue that many of the negative outcomes of contemporary ?capitalism? are caused by the very high levels of state intervention. However, critics of the evidently terrible damage [4] that this has wrought on society and upon the functions of the market economy fail to recognise this situation ? instead arguing for more state intervention!

This applies especially to the Archbishop of Canterbury ? a very learned man, no doubt, but a very deeply misled one. His support for the Robin Hood/Tobin Tax is both wrongheaded but also particularly dangerous [5]. Robin Hood, after all, robbed from tax collectors and political figures to feed those impoverished by them. The Tobin Tax would merely rob from consumers of financial products such as pensioners as well as destroying jobs and economic activity. The attack on bankers? and executives? remuneration as ?greedy? is merely the commission of another sin ? envy. Clergy should be preaching moderation and mutual respect, not urging on the mob.

It would be far more logical for the CofE to support civil society and free markets. From a consequentialist perspective, the most compelling reason for this is that these produce the optimal results. Free markets are also more appropriate from an ethical standpoint. The CofE is fond of pointing out that we need ?morality? and not just free markets. However, morality is best determined at an individual level and not by state diktat. In the absence of discretion ? which is what state intervention delivers ? we simply cannot make genuine moral choices. Moreover, free markets are entirely dependent upon personal morality such as honesty, trust and respect to function. Not only do markets require these virtues, but they also instil them. http://www.iea.org.uk/publications/research/economy-and-virtue [6] Markets also teach the very Christian virtues of thrift and hard work.

From a theological perspective there is a convincing case [7] against state intervention. The message of

Christ is one of liberation and freedom, as Karl Popper reminds us in The Open Society and Its Enemies. The Gospels frequently stress Christ?s opposition to the oppressive [8] role of established teaching and the power of state and theological authority. Sadly, Christian Socialism and ?left? Christianity have generally attracted much more attention and support. It should also be observed that Christ was put to death by the (Roman) state largely at the behest of the Sanhredin, the religious authorities. In answer to the question voiced by the protestors ?What would Jesus do?? I think we can safely answer that He would not recommend promoting an authoritarian state.

From the point of view of the Church itself, it stands to gain [9] from a reduction of the role of the state. As an institution of civil society the Church is exactly the sort of institution that ought to be filling the gaps in welfare provision, education and social capital that would arise if the state were rolled back. Even non-Christian libertarians would ? I suspect - prefer to see the Church fulfilling these roles rather than the state because the Church would be one choice among many rather than the monopolistic provision of the state. It may be coincidental, but there is a strong correlation between the decline in Church attendance and the growth of state intervention in welfare provision. Naturally, it would be a poor case to build Church attendance upon access to welfare, which is what occurs under the present system as parents attend churches to enrol their children in CofE schools. Instead the Church would be fulfilling its proper mission of charity and would cement its function as a vital social institution.

The CofE is, literally, a Catholic Church which contains many diverse congregations. As the Established Church it also has a very privileged relationship with the state. Whilst active membership is relatively low, the CofE still exercises a role within the Constitution and has an influential voice stemming from its historical and cultural importance. It is, therefore, beholden upon its senior clergy to exercise caution and moderation when expressing views regarding matters of political economy. More importantly, perhaps, certain prominent individuals need to think a lot more carefully about the consequences of state intervention before they advocate it, as well as the benefits of a freer society.

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