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“Anglican Social Theology” gives an overview of the theological traditions & ideas underlying the Church of England’s involvement in the public affairs of the nation since the late 1930s. Interesting essays on the legacy associated with Archbishop William Temple, and on more recent “post-liberal” ideas, are joined by helpful insights and reflections from evangelical and Roman Catholic perspectives.

It is “offered as a resource for parishes and church members who are responding in numerous practical ways to widening social divisions and other problems in contemporary society.” It “looks to develop strong theological foundations for social action initiatives by churches”.

I myself badly need the book and I’m very grateful for it, though I cannot pretend to understand all of it. I need the book because I need to discover and develop “strong theological foundations for social action”.

Any new Bishop of Liverpool stands on giants’ shoulders and from that perspective sees the horizon slipping and sliding. I see David Sheppard who spoke courageously for the urban poor in his own speeches and books and through “Faith in the City” which he inspired. I see James Jones who was asked by the Government to chair the Hillsborough Independent Panel because he was seen as a leader in and beyond the community of faith, and to have the wisdom and credibility to do the job well.

But the horizon is slipping and sliding. “Faith in the City” was addressed by the Church to the nation, in the secure belief that the two had a language in common and a platform of mutual respect on which to stand. It assumed an unruffled process by which groups of clever, (mostly) middle-aged (mostly) men would meet together in a room and by thinking carefully about things would come to agreement, and would make progress together for everyone’s benefit. That way of working is described in this book as the “Royal Commission” approach.

But “Faith in the City” was not received with agreement. It offended many in power. It was contentious and controversial and it made and continues to make an enormous difference to the Church’s self-understanding, and on the ground to help people through CUF and its offshoots, and through other practical initiatives. For many in the Thatcher years the Church was seen as a credible voice of opposition, sometimes perhaps the only voice of opposition. However that road was ending and “Faith in the City” was its terminus.

The only Church of England report to have sold as many copies as “Faith in the City” is “Mission-Shaped Church” on which I worked with Bishop James Jones. I believe the report is vital to the future of a Church that can make a difference; but it was addressed by the Church to the Church as a means of getting to grips with a changing England. Like “Faith in the City” it was contended and controversial, but only within the Church. And when Bishop James made his own enormous contribution to the Liverpool region, it was not as the patron of a church report. The Hillsborough Panel was, inevitably and rightly, far more specific and far more emotional than a Royal Commission. It was, and is, a matter of public justice in public view. Years of denial and evasion have been exposed, and the patience and perseverance of the families of the 96 who died has been vindicated. This has been a

harrowing process and the Church has been at the heart of it; but it was not a Church initiative and if it had been, it would not have done what it has.

And now the horizon is slipping and sliding more and more wildly. The gyroscope of our public theology has badly slipped. The Church's public credibility is deeply contended within and outside the Christian community. We don't have to look far for the evidence. The Pilling report sought to stand in that old tradition of calm, magisterial reflection on difficult issues, as the Church more widely tried to do in the national debate over same-sex marriage. Readers of "Thinking Anglicans" will remember the result.

What will be next for the Church? A car-crash, or a genuinely engaged conversation with surprising outcomes? Avoiding the car-crash will need a rare and a key resource - good public theology, ordinary theology, designed for and understandable by ordinary Christians.

"Anglican Social Theology" offers a toolbox with which to make that resource. But it does not offer the resource itself. Its tone is set too high. It is introverted, academic and erudite, sometimes eye-wateringly so.

But to make such a resource; there's a task for the Church's theologians. Because polemic and shouting may be necessary but they are not sufficient. It is thinking together about God - corporate theology - that gives the mind a place to stand, and from that place to reflect wisely on what's happening around. Otherwise the Church has nothing to say outside its own circle, and our internal culture wars become exchanges of insult, or clashes of popular prejudice between Daily Mail people who happen to be Christians and Guardian people who happen to be Christians.

Among the martyrs of the Hitler years were the sophisticated Bonhoeffer and the simple church worker Franz Jagerstatter. Whether it was high-modern Lutheran theology or a penny Catholic catechism, both had resources to use, a place for their mind to stand. I hope that "Anglican Social Theology" will help us develop similar resources for our generation. On its own it is not enough and does not pretend to be. But even so I need it, and maybe you do too.

One final word. For me the most helpful chapter is that exploring "post-liberal" social thought and written by John Hughes, a wonderful young thinker and priest whose tragic death a few months ago has robbed the Church of a future leader of real stature. He will be deeply and greatly missed. I hope that any future edition of this book will be dedicated to him.

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