Responsible Human Beings and the Doctrine of the Trinity

In a recently published collection of essays, Robert J. Barro, Professor of Economics at Harvard, argues that the main factors conducive to economic growth are high levels of schooling, good health (measured by life expectancy), low fertility, low government welfare expenditures, the rule of law, and favorable terms of trade. He further suggests that while some democracy may be good for growth total democracy is likely to bring distortions—especially in the labour market—that are inimical to growth. On the other hand, prosperity is good for democracy. Furthermore, rampant inflation destroys growth, while it can be argued that inflation up to 20% may or may not be. (Determinants of Economic Growth, Robert J. Barro, MIT Press 1997).

The distinguished Indian-born economist, Avinash K. Dixit, Professor of Economics at Princeton, gave the first Munich Lectures in Economics in 1996. (The Making of Economic Policy, Avinash K. Dixit, MIT Press 1996). In them he argued that while economic policies could be developed which were likely in strictly economic terms to be more efficient, they could only be implemented at the expense of political stability. Consequently, he puts forward a theory which he calls, ‘a transaction-cost politics perspective; the economic policy which most cogently and most reasonably takes full account of the political realities, both national and international, will in effect therefore be the most efficient and effective. While therefore, we have to be fully aware of the technical dimensions of economic policy-making in order to secure the best possible growth of an economy, to do so without reference to the political realities which express the human perspectives of economies would be futile. There is no avoiding the human.

Yasusuke Murakami is a very distinguished Japanese economist who held a chair of economics at Tokyo for 26 years. His specific interest was the Japanese economy, but one can hardly be interested in that economy without being interested too in the wider perspectives of the global economy, and in the fullest understanding of Japanese society. He became Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Washington in the last period of his life. He became convinced that an explanation of economic efficiency had to take into account an understanding of human nature in its widest dimensions, and indeed, therefore, became to all intents and purposes a social scientist and philosopher. He is not without some justice often regarded as the Japanese Weber. In his last volume published in Japan in 1993 a few months before his death, he gives us his vision for the next century. (An Anticlassical Political-Economic Analysis, Yasasake Murakami, Stanford U.P. 1996).

There are three fundamental questions which he believes we will have to face. How and in what form can a harmonious and stable post-cold war world order be created? How can the world maintain the economic performance necessary for the well-being of people while minimising the international economic conflicts and further deterioration of the world’s environment? What must be done to safeguard the freedoms of all peoples? In seeking to answer these questions Murakami is absolutely clear that fundamental perspectives on what it is to be human are integral to the debate. Above all perhaps at this juncture in history it is the contrast between the Western Christian religious tradition which seeks transcendence via the liberalism of action, and an Eastern religious (Buddhist) tradition which is more concerned with an extended consciousness with which we will have to learn to deal constructively. The key issue
For our future is how to bring these two traditions of ‘liberalism’ into creative and sustained relationship.

For the future, our human responsibility includes, effective and sustainable economic growth, if the ‘common good’ is to be continuously sought - and it must be sought even if we must assume that it can never be fully understood let alone completely realised; it will require political, social and economic structures which enable us to take account of the environment, and to include all people; it will be influenced by the realities of human nature, as increasingly discovered by biologists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers. Moreover, it will be made by the sense of what it is to be human, - to be a ‘self’, which from an interior as well as an exterior perspective, we humans cultivate and realise for ourselves.

It is these perceptions and insights which will inform our choices regarding policies and institutions through which and in which we will ‘make’ our selves. And it is at this point that the religious traditions have most directly their potential to influence and inform our understanding of ‘what it is to be human and how to enable that to flourish’. The global perspective which dominates our thinking in the economic and political contexts, is the atmosphere which we must learn to breathe. It should be a natural environment for catholic Christians which. I take it for granted. all Methodists are. Of course this positive stance towards globalisation is not universally acceptable. The Sierra Club, for example, is concerned to emphasise the vital significance of the local in all good economic and political practice, if the environment human as well as natural, is to be effectively sustained. (see, for example, The Case Against the Global Economy. Eds. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Sierra Club Books. 1996). But since it is inconceivable that we will reverse the trend towards globalisation. it is to the questions raised by Murakami that we must devote ourselves with enthusiasm and confidence.

What I have to say in the rest of this paper is addressed to a Christian perspective on these matters. Theologically. I shall argue. while we do not any more than others have simple solutions, we are well-equipped to take the questions seriously and to tackle them with optimism and confidence. The reason for this optimism being well-grounded in the claims which we make for the Christian view of what it is to be human.

II

You may have noticed how keen Finance Ministers have been latterly to claim theological insight for their financial policies. Nowhere has this been more so than in the United Kingdom. You will know that the New Model Labour Party committed itself to following the pattern of public expenditure planned by the old Tory administration for the first two years of government. What you may not have noticed is that in each of the budget speeches of the last four years and as a matter of fact in several public statements on financial policy, the respective Chancellors of the Exchequer have committed themselves to being prudent. That is, they have wanted us to understand just how far-seeing they are, how sensibly cautious, how strong and insightful. What is more, they are inclined to suggest that in coming to their conclusions, they have taken everyone’s interests into account. - not only in this generation but generations to come, so that we can rest assured and confident that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Above all, there should be profound satisfaction amongst us all that we have a caring, courteous, and responsible Chancellor, who is judiciously providing for the interests not merely for the basic needs
of every citizen. No doubt prudence is a virtue, but we can claim too much for ourselves in regard to it, or indeed protest too much. It may in its full potential be beyond us, however well-intentioned we may be. But the concept has another and more profound, dimension.

In Christian theological language we should be using the word ‘Providence’. Given that we hold that God is the creator of the whole universe, and that there was no other agent involved, nor was there any internal or external constraint on God setting about the making of a world which was entirely in conformity with his intentions, we can only assume that there is nothing which is beyond his care and courteous attention. As Aquinas said, ‘All events that take place in this world, even those apparently fortuitous or casual, are comprehended in the order of divine Providence, on which fate depends.’ (Exposition.Perihermenias.i.lect.14). Such claims have been the subject of great disputes and divisions within the Church. Do humans have free will and if so how are we to understand the limits within which it is set? Do we have to settle for the fact that since God knows everything and has the power to change anything if he so chooses, there is nothing in the world which could have been different from how in fact it was? And in any case, while it is all very well, to think of us having some influence in the minutiae of our affairs, - whether I blow my nose now or in a minute’s time, or whether I choose to holiday in Majorca or the Philippines, - it is quite out of order to think that I might have any real influence on larger things such as the expansion of MacDonalds, or the development of mathematics. And when it comes to the global issues to which I earlier alluded, there is simply no debate. The expansion of the human population, military conflict about the supply of water, or the future of democracy and the spread of information technology, are quite beyond our control.

To this at this stage I can only answer, ‘Maybe’. You see, I have the view that the world which we enjoy, and the role to which we are called and which we aspire to, is one where we are held accountable. This is not a threatening or even a demanding position in which we find ourselves: it is no more and no less than what is in fact bound up with being a creature in relationship with the Creator, understood as Christians understand what it means for God to be a Creator. To talk of providence in this context means that the world in which we find ourselves is one in which it is reasonable for God to hold to account, because things are such that we can fulfil our responsibilities. As Kant so clearly showed, it would be unreasonable, and indeed immoral for any person to hold another responsible for a state of affairs which they lacked the power, opportunity or knowledge to avoid. Providentially, that is as a result of the creative relationship which God has with the world and with us his creatures, we are not put into that position. What is more we have the freedom to accept, or not to accept, responsibility.

Our horizons are expanding now at a rate greater than has previously been the case. While therefore it has always been difficult to think in an emergent world because instead of being anticipatory our thinking, even when predictive, is only so retrospectively. We are always looking to explain experience rather than to interpret it and to take risks in the light of it, what in Christian parlance one is inclined to all ‘ventures of faith’. hence at the present moment we are inclined to neglect the obvious consequences of science and technology, and to withdraw from the imaginative sympathy require to inhabit the future. But it is as true now as it has been in the past, that we have been given the intelligence, wit, skill and imagination so as to be able to be responsible for the world in which we are set. The concept of the human within which we work as Christian theologians is one which offers us that vocation.
In order to be responsible, there has first of all to be response-ability. The most intriguing development of our understanding of the human person is the extent to which we have become increasingly aware of our response-ability. On the one hand, there is the central nervous system with its complex and sensitive physiology via which we record and programme the data we receive about the nature of the external world; on the other is the imaginative capacity to organise experience into a lively set of disciplines in terms of which we get to grips with our world. It will pay us to take stock briefly of the progress which has been made. And, by the way, I am still in certain contexts an unashamed user of the word ‘progress’; we were no doubt right to become a little more suspicious about its use after nineteenth century optimism collapsed in the traumas of two world wars and the appalling treatment meted out by one human being to another in all sorts of conflicts, military, political, and economic in the course of the twentieth century. What sort of progress does that suggest? However, that we do not ‘make progress’ in significant areas of experience, and that we do not have an increasing opportunity to take account of the needs of our world, seems plainly false.

But consider our sense of the shape and history of the world. We live on a semi-ellipse; we live in a universe that is billions of years old, during which our own life as a human race can be considered as having taken but an infinitesimal amount of time. Or consider the increased understanding of the brain which we have as a result of progress in physical biochemistry. Or, again, how much greater is our understanding of the location, expansion and organisation of towns as a result of the mathematical modelling of the patterns of human settlement. The sheer capacity to measure, to store information, to define and explore relationships, to experiment with the prospect of getting interesting results which are in principle repeatable is astonishing. And the opportunity to do these things in contexts and in places which would have been impossible a century ago is there and expanding. One thinks of the inside of the artery, the surface of Mars, the structure of the atom, the genetic code, and the treatment of diabetes. In support of all this via new materials, we have the technological achievements of the computer, the jet engine, nuclear power and virtual reality. None of these things in itself would justify us in making wild claims about the nature of our humanity; yet, all together with the other things which I could have mentioned in addition, we have in them testimony to the growing response-ability of the human being. Because we know more about the nature of our world, we have greater power to intervene, to influence, to change. Because we can re-organise and re-structure our experience, we are able to propose to ourselves different policies and different styles of behaviour for the future, to monitor the consequences, and revise our behaviour accordingly.

Response-ability only provides one necessary condition for the exercise of responsibility, the other is a willingness to accept it. One’s willingness to do the latter is largely a product of the view which one has of human nature. Thus, if one is of the opinion that as a human being one has no freedom to exercise independent judgement in the circumstances with which one is faced, then there will be felt no obligation or even interest to do anything about it. One’s performance will be viewed as merely a part of the performance of something else over which one has no conceivable control. However, if one holds the view that one is a being capable of forming a perception of one as a self which could choose one course of action rather than another, then one will be concerned to get as accurate an account of the situation as one can, and to learn
what the range of possible actions is which is open to one. One will also want to
investigate which of those actions is likely to be the best, and why. In other words one
will be engaged in moral enquiry as a moral agent and in some sense or another
wanting to behave well, and to practise what is good. Just exactly what that is may be
unclear from time to time, as is whether there is such a thing as ‘The Good’. However,
as Bryan Magee points out, there is usually more doubt about whether one is going to
do what is right, than about whether one knows whether what one is inclined to do is
right or not. (Confessions of a Philosopher. Bryan Magee. Weidenfeld and
Nicolson, 1997, pp. 490-1). A very Christian position. I would venture, for a writer
who, despite his enthusiasm for The Confessions of St. Augustine (together with
Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, the two greatest books), declares himself to be an
atheist who has never had the slightest inclination to take religion seriously.

But there is more to it than this in the Christian tradition. One is a physical being,
entirely explicable in physical terms on one level; one is a moral being, wholly open to
the possibility of becoming aware of the needs of others and capable of taking them
into account; in another dimension, but in addition, and at a more basic level, one is
also a child of God. What does that add to one’s sense of oneself as a creative,
responsible human being in a world where one is beginning to appreciate the hugeness
of one’s responsibility for oneself and for a world whose vastness and complexity are
increasingly apparent?

In particular it points to a relationship. In order to understand what that might
amount to and what relevance it might have to the question of human responsibility, it
will be necessary next to say something about the nature of God as he is conceived to
be in Christian theology.

IV

I shall confine myself to a discussion of the classical attributes of God, his
omnipotence, his omniscience, his omnipresence, together with his absolute and utter
self-giving in love to the other.

When considering the all-powerfulness of God, it is natural to compare this with
our human experience of power. Especially when we are at the receiving end of actions
which we cannot prevent or deflect, our thought is, ‘if only we were more powerful’.
It must have crossed the minds of many in Poland and Germany in July this year as
they faced the horrendous consequences of torrential rain and consequent flooding.
The Desperate Dan, or Mr Marvel syndrome is not far away from our response to
threat. There always are, it appears, people who have greater physical strength or who
can wield more power and influence than we can. All we can do is exercise our
imaginations and wish that we were even more powerful than them. And we are
simply inclined to extend the scale when it comes to God. He at least, we fondly
imagine, can do anything. He could defeat all enemies, so provided we line up behind
him we shall be all right. Now, I do not for one moment suppose that any of us hold
this view: I am however of the opinion that as a matter of fact it seems as if we do
from time to time. And in any case most people do, and most people who are
sophisticated about it, wish they did, or wish they could. After all, it would be so
much more simple. But that is just the point; it would not. Actually God can only do
those things which it is in his nature to want to do, and it is only in his nature to do
those things which are wholly and completely in the interests of the well-being of the
other. And if it is his concern to work for the self-conscious emergence of the other in
relationship with him, everything which he does must be consistent with that intention. To exert his power without reference to that intention would be contrary to his nature.

But in that case what does omnipotence mean when applied to God? It is not the absoluteness of the power that is in question, but its reference. God does not have absolute power over the other, but over himself. This is a very significant claim. There is no external power, no internal tension, no exasperation or frustration which could cause God to be other than he is, or to behave in a way which is contrary to his nature. In this sense he does not and cannot change (though there are senses were I writing specifically on this topic where I would wish to claim that God suffered, and therefore was capable of ‘change’). To be powerful in this sense exactly provides for that essential task of ‘coping with oneself’, being in control; moreover, it removes any need for having to test oneself in relation to the other or of having to prove oneself. There is nothing to prove, since we know well from our own experience that in proving oneself one is only proving oneself to oneself. That is an unnecessary matter so far as God is concerned. He is who he is, and not another being.

When it comes to considering God’s omniscience, we are also attracted by the thought of complete knowledge. After all, we could win Jeopardy every time, and Mastermind, - just to give a little class to our aspirations. Though winning the lottery might be more to the taste of some of us! And while there are things which would give us pause for thought, - do we really want to know the dates of the deaths of the various members of our families? Do we want to know what our income will be in twenty years time, or whether the joke we have just enjoyed really was funny or not? Nevertheless, the thought that we might have competitive advantage by knowing something that others did not is very attractive. Wasn’t this analogous to what Barro was saying about good schooling and economic growth? You provide yourself with greater knowledge and skill than others and the chances are you will flourish more than they will. But this is not the point. For the one thing that can throw away one’s whole future is lack of knowledge of oneself which is the contrary of what we claim as Christians in respect of God. It is lack of knowledge and skill which causes us to lose control of ourselves and to lose our tempers. The childhood experience of frustration which leads us to throw our bricks around the room when for the fourteenth time we fail to throw the tenth brick on the top of the pile and do not know how to do what we want to do, lives with us throughout our lives, though our limits change. God has no limits, because he has full knowledge of himself. The thought that he has an interior life and an external life and that one may conflict with the other is totally inapplicable to him; he knows himself utterly and cannot discover some inner conflict, or experience any shocking external constraint.

Omnipresence is more difficult to get one’s mind around. However, it seems that one might construe it in the light of the two attributes already discussed. God knows himself and has complete control of himself. With the result that he cannot be conceived of as having any limit to where or when he is, because ‘presence’ concerns occupying space and being subject to change. ‘Omnipresence’ is the way in which we try to make this difference plain to ourselves. It is not, in other words, that he is everywhere, or nowhere; it is rather that he simply is, non-temporarily present, and therefore capable of being known for himself at every time and place.

The most important implication from this brief analysis is that God is therefore free to give himself graciously to the other in affectionate presence and serve the essential well-being of the other. God has nothing to hide, nothing to defend, nothing to be suspicious of, nothing to be paranoid about; he is himself and will always be so
whatever the circumstances, whatever the actual relationships, and however welcome he is in that relationship. Above all there is no question of having to force himself on the other, as if rejection was going to undermine in some way his identity. This freedom for the other, is what we call God's loving-kindness, his gracious healing, encouraging and welcoming presence. It is the condition of his acceptance of responsibility in creating; it is who he is that makes it possible for him to take the risk of bringing into existence that which is other than himself, and which enables him to bear the burden of care which will continuously give the opportunity to the other, his creation, to become itself through relationship with him. The world can do its worst, God will still be the same, for ever and ever.

V

How can we further describe what it is for creation and creature to be themselves in relation to God? It is the very fact that God exists in relation to himself with full knowledge, and power over himself that reveals his nature as free for the other and therefore graciously capable of affirming the other in its own right. Since he does not depend upon anything else for his existence or his nature, he can afford to bring that which is other than himself into existence for its own sake. The otherness of the other includes temporality and spacial location since they are the necessary conditions of growth to maturity, but that does not of itself separate the creature from the Creator since God's omnipresence is an aspect of what it is for him to be God. However, given the willingness of God to commit himself to the well-being of the other, the creation - the other has the opportunity freely to explore its own nature and being, and responsibly come to a realisation of the fundamental relationship which characterises its true existence through which it will fulfil its own potentiality.

The relationship of God and creation is expressed most succinctly and openly in God's relationship with humankind. We have the potential to know ourselves as children of God, who may enjoy the fullness of a relationship with God, and the possibility of such knowledge and skill in our world as will enable us to accept responsibility for it before him.

Our tendency, however, is not to seek the glory of God - his presence, but rather to want domestication and/or reductionist control. The risk of God's presence is too much for us to bear, and therefore the risk of seeking ourselves and our true natures by commitment to another equally threatening. Thus, we would like to be told what to do and to be required to do it, for our own good. We find it very difficult to see that it might not actually be for our own good, if this was the case. For our own good will only be achieved if willingly and freely we have found the Ground of our Being for ourselves, and taken responsibility for the world of which we are a part with the fullest knowledge and most competent skill that we can muster. God's nature has to be such as to enable us to be and to become in this way. He therefore cannot be the authoritarian or dictatorial God who, from time to time we would like him to be; he has on the contrary to become authoritative. His authoritativeness can only be recognised by us as he allows his authority to be tested. It is by testing in its various and appropriate modes that we discover the truth, and begin the process of becoming response-able; especially it is by testing that we find out the primary value for us of a personal relationship, as parents and children experience on a daily basis. While we as children may discover that our parents have limits to our capacity to go on ad infinitum seeking unconditionally our well-being, that is part of what we need to learn in order to be able to fulfil our later responsibilities as parents. However, as I have argued above.
for God there are no such limits. His willingness to be tested is unlimited, as his capacity to give himself freely to the other’s well-being is also unlimited. He is therefore capable of revealing himself through this testing, as the one who is trustworthy, and who will not act in a way which is contrary to his nature.

This simple generosity is unacceptable by us, - indeed unbelievable to us; it is even inclined to make us angry. The consequence is that we think that we are able to manage on our own and in order to be ourselves must learn to do so. So whereas we also, as children of God who are made in his image, should seek to find ourselves and be true to our natures by, as far as we are able, giving ourselves to others unconditionally, since we are unwilling to allow our authority to be tested, we resort to an attempt to employ power. The result is that others are denied their freedom to become themselves because we will not allow them the freedom to find themselves. Without that freedom others have no real relationship with us, who therefore also lose our freedom. The whole matter is one of self-defeating frustration of the purposes of God in creating.

And we have to justify it even to ourselves, so great is the ineradicable desire for transformation and fulfilment within our human nature, (see, Immortal Longings, Fergus Kerr, SPCK, 1997). The first ploy is to reduce our aspirations, and to deny that there is any such fundamental relationship or any such being. Our task as we subsequently conceive of it, is to be realistic and come to terms with ourselves as persons who are in effect ‘on their own’. On this basis we look for competitive advantage over others in order to be ‘successful’. The second ploy is to diminish our sense of self by pretending to ourselves that even if there is any such relationship possible, the one who offers it, is so far beyond us in beauty, justice and truth, that we are not able or -this is the real dimension of self-knowledge - worthy to come into his presence. Therefore what we might on other grounds have thought possible, with truly honest insight, we now realise we must do without. The consequence is that we ‘manage’ temporarily as well as we can, but recognise sadly that the world is of such a kind that there is no future. These routes and various others similar to them, are all alike failures to recognise the nature of God, and of our human nature.

The Christian theological perspective on these matters is bound up with the unpacking of our understanding of God as Trinity. The God who is capable of sustaining this world with its full potential unimpaired continuously is the God who has committed himself to its actual fulfilment, and who no matter what misunderstanding or betrayal is lived through, is always true to himself. Thus God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, is who God is in relation to his world. In the light of this realisation, there is no sense in falsely limiting our own natures; we are indeed persons and we do have the potential in relationship with him to give ourselves wholly to the well-being of the other, and to find ourselves by becoming response-able, and subsequently accepting responsibility for ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the wider creation of which we are a part. This is not hubris; this is our natural right, duty and delight: this is the fulfilment of our true nature. If we do not attempt it, we shall simply not be satisfied.

VI

I began with references to economics and I now revert to that context. For the question arises, how do we as Christians become response-able and therefore responsible in economic matters? Economics can be variously defined. I shall employ the most general. - the efficient and effective management of the resources of a
household, company, country or other organisation to effect the agreed mission. Such a definition does not confine the role of economics to money and finance. What is from our Christian perspective the mission of an enterprise organisation or an economic system? How would we judge the performance of a political economy? And what would we wish to include in our definition of resources? Certainly we would include employees; it has become conventional wisdom to say that they are the most important assets of any organisation. Yet, I have no immediate recollection that in the last twenty years of 'down-sizing' and 'right-sizing', there have been critical attention given to the well-being of employees. Shareholders, customers, and directors, yes: employees, no! Yet this area of persons is the very one with which we seem most concerned as Christians. And it is this area where we are most directly concerned with freedom. How do we organise ourselves in an economy, so as to contribute to the freedom of all those who are participants, and so as to secure their willing and creative participation? How do we increase our awareness of the fact that all human beings are in principle participants? How do we discipline ourselves so as to think inclusively rather than exclusively?

There seems to be an inherent conflict between the organisation and accountability which we need to run efficient and effective organisations from a financial and economic point of view and the seriously creative personal concern which should characterise the proper personal world of Christian governance. Perhaps we should accept the view of a very significant person in British financial life who said to me on one occasion that his life as a business man and his life as a Christian were two quite separate matters, always presuming, of course, that the personal values of Christian integrity informed his personal practice in his business. However, given that it seems to me that we human beings are called to accept responsibility for the whole created universe, and that this is not an arrogant presumption on our part, but God’s genuine calling, that view is simply not acceptable. We have to do better than that.

There are four basic dimensions to be taken into account. First we are talking of all people. There is no person who is excluded from our economic concern. Nobody earns his or her membership of the human race; one simply is by the accident of one’s birth, a member of it. We therefore have no opportunity to include or exclude from our purview any who in our judgement do not seem at a particular time to fit. In making decisions we have to try to take everyone into account. Secondly, we have to include all living creatures. We have been less good at doing this hitherto than we should have been; it will take a great deal of imaginative effort before we actually do so. This is not just a matter of personal interest, - there will be no horses for us to enjoy riding unless we look after them - it is a matter of objective concern too. We need to assure ourselves that we are capable of taking care of the other for its own sake. for in so doing we create the possibility of relationships which will be creative for us, however risky that might be. Thirdly, there is the natural world of plants, and the physical environment which supports us all. There will be even greater imagination necessary before we an accept that this is not merely subjectively but objectively of concern to us. It does not merely provide us with the oxygen we require, and the sugars, but is to be appreciated, affirmed and enjoyed for its own sake. Above all there is the fourth dimension of the fundamental relationship within which all these others cohere and make sense. As in the perceptive creation myth where it is said that God saw each aspect of creation that it was good, (which I take to mean that he affirmed that it had value for its own sake as well as in relation to his purposes), so also we have to learn to take delight in this world for its own sake, and
celebrate the fact that it is therefore good. The way in which we learn to do this is by realising - that is by formally making a reality of - our relationship with the Creator. We do not own the world, we are members of God’s creation charged with responsibility for it - with him. This raises very difficult questions of comparative judgement. In taking care of the whole, we may have to take decisions about a part which seem to raise doubts about our appreciation of them for their own sakes. Biotechnology and gene manipulation seems to raise very seriously questions of this kind.

In economic terms that adds some questions to those normally attended to by any auditor. In what sense, and to what extent, does the economic system which we have put in place, allow us to take account of the interests of all people? How would we recognise when we had achieved this? Or is it rather the case, that the striving to achieve is part of the growing to maturity as a responsible person which is necessary to our Christian faith? To what extent do we encourage people to learn and to take responsibility for themselves with others, or do we rather take the line of least resistance and look for the power which domesticates and in principle humiliates? How open are we with information, knowledge, or the passing on of skills, or how keen are we to patent what we have learned or developed for our own benefit?

When it comes to the rest of the creaturely world, to plants and the physical universe, what are the limits we put to our concern, and how do we interpret the consequences of our choices? Are there categories for which we are unwilling or unable to be accountable, such as the world’s beauty, because we simply lack the tools with which to work? A visit to Central Europe after the collapse of the Russian Empire, and the evident failure of the planned economies, leaves one fearful for the future. Planning for the future meant neglecting the well-being of the total environment in such a way as to bring into question any possibility of a real future. But in other ways do not all economies take decisions which threaten our well-being as a human race? We have to recognise that in order to secure a private good, we may be putting in jeopardy long-term personal well-being. So we have to raise questions not just about individual well-being, but about the nature of the communities with which as human beings we variously cohere, physical, moral, social, personal, intellectual, natural, and divine.

I do not for one moment claim that these issues are easy: I do claim that they are unavoidable, that we are equipped to take responsibility for them, and that it is actually our nature, as it is analogously God’s nature, to want to do so. Furthermore, I claim that our understanding of God himself, and his relation to the world in creation, is the encouragement and insight we need in order to take up the challenge. Moreover, the process of globalisation, feared by so many and undoubtedly providing may risks, is actually the atmosphere which could stimulate a greater sense of belonging and community with which to tackle the many issues with which we are faced, as well as the context in which to find a new understanding of God as Creator and Redeemer.

VII

While globalisation provides the atmosphere, it also makes for greater difficulties and temptations. We are familiar with what some of them are. I shall focus briefly on three. First, the nation state is no longer the locus of tradition, language or wealth. From the nineteenth century in particular, but beginning of course much earlier, we have been accustomed to think of ourselves as taking an identity from the state of which we were citizens. The universities as we know them in the twentieth century
were established, beginning with Humboldt University in Berlin on behalf of the Prussian state, to give a sense of national identity through the study of history, of language and literature. They carried, and to a considerable extend made, the traditions of the state in which they were set. The universities also fulfilled the important task of providing administrators, political leaders, scientists and engineers for industry so that the state could ensure its long-term wealth and future prosperity, and therefore the continued loyalty of its citizens. Their significance, particularly in Europe but also elsewhere in the world when they were established, was made clear by the fact that they were variously subsidised, or funded by the state, and their professors given an important status in society. The nation state can no longer control the universities. The state is no longer a major employer, and is everywhere trying to reduce the dependence of the universities on public funds. The argument is frequently heard that the individual graduate and his or her employer are the major beneficiaries. The move towards making the universities more dependent upon employers, and the courses more vocational and less ‘liberal’ for want of a better term, as mass higher education replaces elitism, is universally apparent.

The national state in financial terms is also a decreasing player in the market. The Bank of England, could not defend the pound against speculators in 1990, and the failure of the Bundesbank wholeheartedly to join it to defend the European currency regime then existing, is but an illustration of the fact that while both the Bank and the Bundesbank knew that they were likely to fail through lack of resources, the Bundesbank did not have the same political necessity to act as the Bank of England. Now we are quite clear. There are no central banks. including those of the USA, Japan and Europe which could take on the speculators and win. The amount of money traded in a day is beyond their capacity to control. Of the hundred largest economies in the world, less than 50% are nation states. But it is not just money that is not under control by the nation state, neither is employment, nor is investment. They can now go wherever the decision-making believes it will be most profitably placed. So if there is a future for the nation state it is of a different kind to what we have hitherto known.

What replaces it is as yet unclear. There are moves towards regionalism, and there is a resurgence of nationalism, tribalism and localism. Each has its dangers, and that they will be hard to manage. much current political experience is tending to confirm. But employment moves more towards the trans-national corporation, or the international agency, with huge consequences for human identity, loyalty and education.

The second area of concern will be the environment. Maybe there was a time when the nation state could look after the environment in all its dimensions. That time is long past. For one thing we now know much more about the inter-connectedness of the environment and its complexity, that we are clear no nation state could ever control its own pollution without agreements and enforcement procedures with other states. While from time to time there may have been goodwill and reciprocity, because states shared boundaries, such as Germany and Holland with regard to the Rhine, or because they shared a common interest in the purity of a commodity, such as clean air, the movement of which neither could effectively control, we can now see that national states were and certainly are ineffective. Trans-national corporations can and will move polluting manufacturing processes where the health and safety regulations are least obtrusive, with damage to employment in one country and health in another. The United Nations has turned out to be of limited value in establishing new means for monitoring, and controlling industrial practices. Furthermore, there are common needs
which in the foreseeable future will tend to further destabilise regions already apparently irreconcilably at odds politically; thus the shortage of water in the Middle East will make an already tense situation worse. What processes and systems of management, co-operation and sound judgement can we put in place to ensure that in making decisions we take the interests of all people and the total environment into account?

The third issue is technology, and in particular information technology. It is a splendid thing that we have the opportunity to communicate with one another almost instantaneously by means of a variety of mutually supportive means. But the speed is such that all the issues raised by implication in connection with political and economic structures, and with the environment, - not to mention the personal - are compounded. Speed is not obviously consistent with good practice and the building up of wisdom when it comes to political and economic decisions: speed may be a usefully neutral term but it can soon deteriorate into haste, and then into rashness. And while we can be pleased at the thought of all that personal communication and its possibilities for sustaining and growing a sense of identity and common interest with friends all over the world, - and the potential of this to create a sense of being one human race should not be minimised - we should also beware the possibility that it could be a further means whereby democracy is undermined and totalitarianism boosted.

Globalisation provides a new atmosphere and a new horizon, one which in principle includes everyone, and the whole created order. It is a context therefore in which as a race, perhaps for the first time in human history, we can seriously entertain the thought that we can act responsibly on behalf of the whole world in relation to God. Our history, science and technology, provide us with possibilities and opportunities for rational choices, the means to monitor them and to learn from them with sufficient speed to be able to do something when they go wrong. What the structures will be through which we could effectively do this remain to be seen. Christians have an important responsibility to share in the discussion of policies, and to take part in creating organisations which will enable us to undertake the responsibilities we undoubtedly have.

If these political, economic and social structures are not only to be effective but creative and redemptive for our world and our human being, they will have to be cognisant of the fundamental relationship of God and the world and of our real nature as human beings.

VII

It was of course not a temptation for God that he should choose to behave in an authoritarian way. He could not behave in any way which was contrary to his nature. He was not in any doubt about his own power over himself, because he has complete knowledge of himself. Since nothing interferes with his capacity to be himself, he is the same at all times and at all places, and has no limit to which he has to adapt. His aseity is what enables him to be entirely given in gracious presence to his creation concerned wholly and absolutely for its good and not for his self-preservation. The creation has therefore the freedom to be itself, and so do we as the persons through whom the creation realises its true nature in relation to God. The world is not conditionally available to God but wholly available to God at all times. That is, God does not require human beings to ‘behave themselves’ before he will be present; his loving kindness, manifested in his covenant relationship with the world, simply means that he is present because this is his world and wholly committed to its well-being. Because he is utterly
response-able, he is therefore also responsible; this is a non-theological way of saying that God is not only the Creator but also the redeemer. But of course, his redeeming activity refers to the manner of his being as creator, it is not something which he does or did subsequently to an act of creation.

Our difficulty as human beings is of course almost the converse. We do not believe that things are as they are, we do not believe that we are part of something which is judged to be successful and perfectible, we do not sense the reality of the God whose nature is to give himself to us and therefore we do not know the power of the relationship which makes us what we are and can enable us to become what we can be. We assume therefore with, it has to be said, some reason, that we are in fact essentially part of something which is partial, temporary and chaotic. In these circumstances we find it necessary to protect ourselves. Whereas with God there is the presumption of loving affectionate presence which affirms the other. In our case as mere humans, we assume a black world of darkness where there is the assumption of fear and the desire to domesticate and control. So far, therefore, from seeking to commit ourselves to the well-being of the other, on the contrary, we want power over the other, even while of course we know in daily experience that the power we could have is only temporary, only limited, and in the end, frustrating because it gets in the way of us being ourselves.

We are good at justifying the position which we find ourselves in too. The justifications have three dimensions. First, the world is complex, unpredictable, and daunting. It is beyond our understanding and control. Secondly, other people are complex, unpredictable and daunting. They are beyond our understanding and control. Thirdly, the world in general, and the world in particular of the human, is all we have to work on and work with. But they are not the sorts of world which we would have constructed for ourselves, and therefore we feel outsiders struggling to get control of something, rather than insiders seeking to understand, to develop and to express. There is an anger within which distorts reality, and takes us out of relationship with ourselves and with one another. But this anger which leads us to want to wrestle parts of the world away from itself and build them into our own worlds, leads to nothing. As opposed to God, therefore, human being is not response-able, and consequently unable to act responsibly. We do not have power over ourselves, and therefore we choose to act irresponsibly; we do not have power over ourselves because we do not have full knowledge of ourselves, and indeed are frightened to acquire it for fear of what we might discover. The importance of this experience, however, is that it can be and ultimately will be, of itself, revelatory of the true nature of things, because it is ultimately revelatory of God and the relationship which he has with the world.

This is the key to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus whom we call the Christ. The world is capable of assuming, or receiving the fullness of what it is for God to be God without harm, threat or destruction of what it is to be human. Indeed it is only by receiving the fullness of what it is to be God, that the human comes to be what it is over against the God who creates and redeems. So no matter what the world does to Jesus, he cannot but point to that relationship of God and the world which affirms him to be who he is. He cannot determine the way in which God behaves, but then he does not have to because God is who he is and cannot behave in any other way than what would be consistent with his nature. God in Christ affirms by his own being what it is for humankind to be human. The eternity of that divine commitment and that reality is found in the trinity. - God for us for all time and in every way, because that is who God is.
IX

The implications of this for our human structures of organisation and management within politics and the economy is of course not direct. How could it be! We are not controlled by God, and do not even have the luxury therefore of deducing what we should do and how we should behave from statements which we put on the page about God, however directed towards the truth they might be. What we have is an account of God’s beauty, love, creative presence and gracious power, with affirms our sense of being ourselves, on which we can draw in order to learn how to live, work and be for others in our world. We have to be creatively and redemptively critical of those structures which domesticate and potentially dehumanise.

The structures of our economic life are of particular concern to me and the Centre which I am in process of establishing at the Queen’s College in Birmingham. There are a very large number of questions associated with the inter-relationship of theology, political economy, economics and finance. It will take some time to specify what they are, and even longer to propose the most creative and redemptive ways of thinking about them. There will of course not be answers. But what there might be are ways of thinking which in themselves make for a human conversation which gives life, promotes response-ability, and therefore makes it more likely that we could act responsibly.

Globalisation presents us with an environment in which this will be even more critical than ever before. It also provides us with means that previous generations have hardly ever dreamed of. It was Dylan Thomas who succinctly presented the question, in his marvellous poem.

_Ears in the turrets hear._

Ears in the turrets hear
Hands grumble on the door,
Eyes in the gables see
The fingers at the locks.
Shall I unbolt or stay
Alone till the day I die
Unseen by stranger-eyes
In this white house?
Hands, hold you poison or grapes?

Beyond this island bound
By a thin sea of flesh
And a bone coast.
The land lies out of sound
And the hills out of mind.
No birds or flying fish
Disturbs this island’s rest.

Ears in this island hear
The wind pass like a fire,
Eyes in this island see
Ships anchor off the bay.
Shall I run to the ships
With the wind in my hair,
Or stay till the day I die
And welcome no sailor?
Ships, hold you poison or grapes?

Hands grumble on the door.
Ships anchor off the bay,
Rain beats the sand and slates.
Shall I let in the stranger,
Shall I welcome the sailor,
Or stay till the day I die?

Hands of the stranger and holds of the ships,
Hold you poison or grapes?


I know that Dylan Thomas was not obviously a practising Christian; however, in this question he seems to me to capture the essence of the human approach to experience. Poison, or grapes? As Christians we can have no doubt where God stands, whatever doubt we might entertain about our ability to understand and to interpret it to ourselves, let alone to others. This is why as theologians we should welcome the sentiments of Milton’s prologue to book one of his masterpiece, and address our prayer to the Holy Spirit:-

And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost preferr
Before all Temples th’upright heart and pure.
Instruct me. for Thou know’st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspred
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad’st it pregnant: What in mee is dark
Illumin, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justifie the ways of God to men.


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