4 Social Justice and the Predicament of Religion

I hope the first three chapters have shown that the conceptions of justice, and their presuppositions, illustrated by rationalistic theories, especially their modern variants, are vastly different from those encountered in the great religions of the world. It should have become clear, too, that the notion of social justice, in its narrow sense, is very much a product of modern consciousness. While it is the centrepiece of liberal and socialist conceptions of justice – what Nozick calls ‘end-state principles’ of justice – it would be difficult to maintain that traditional religious conceptions of justice have anything much to do with it. The main concern of the latter is righteousness, the highest virtue to be displayed by individuals, both as a mark of character and as a determinant of social conduct. Justice, understood as righteousness, is, one might say, the whole of virtue, and not merely a particular virtue.

Given this sharp contrast between social justice, in its narrow sense, and justice as righteousness, one would have thought that it would be self-evident to everyone concerned that religion, properly understood, cannot be regarded as a tool of social justice. And yet this issue has been at the forefront of much recent theological debate. That this should be so is itself, perhaps, a tribute to the power of liberal and socialist thought. To what extent Vatican II itself was necessitated by this power may be hard to assess; although it would be equally hard to deny that it may have played a role. What seems certain, however, is that, especially after Vatican II, it was no longer so unusual to regard social justice as a legitimate concern of religion. This was because:

With Vatican II the Catholic church, as it were, turned itself inside out. Prior to the council Catholics were taught that their main business in life was to remain in the ‘state of grace’ and get to heaven. The church was the custodian of the means of grace and truth. In such a scheme earthly matters were ultimately inconsequential. At Vatican II, accepting and building on decades of work by theologians, the Catholic church modestly accepted its ‘pilgrim’ status, journeying alongside the rest of humankind. In a further radical shift the church began to see in ‘human progress’ evidence of God’s working in human history.
It should be added that the works of theologians to which reference has just been made were not necessarily all Catholics, nor, understandably, was the impact of Vatican II confined to Catholics.

But, obviously, its influence on Catholics has been immense: so much so that even a fairly conservative pope, such as John Paul II, is apt to talk in the ‘jargon of social justice’. For example, speaking to ‘an enthusiastic group of priests and nuns’ in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1985, the pope had this to say:  

There are sectors in which social progress and well-being manifest themselves in a luxurious egoism, while other sectors remain in poverty, on the fringes and illiterate. The church, committed to man, especially the most poor and alienated, cannot ignore these situations. It must not resign itself passively to leave these things as they are or, as often happens, to degenerate into worse situations.  

There is a sense in which some at least of the pope’s remarks may have been intended to ‘upstage’ Liberation theology in Latin America by showing that he and his church were equally concerned with questions of social justice. But it would be wrong to doubt his sincerity. Although, on the same occasion, he also directly tried to undermine Liberation theology by saying, ‘To be faithful to the church is not to be taken in by doctrines or ideologies contrary to Catholic dogma, as certain groups of materialist inspiration or doubtful religious content would wish’, what seems to me to be important is the expression of his belief that social justice is, and should legitimately be, the concern of religion – ‘Catholic dogma’ in this particular case. What his detailed prescriptions to the Latin American Catholic church were on how to go about achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, I do not know. But it is clear that he wished the church not to resign itself passively to the existence of inequalities and injustices in society. In other words, the church must become an instrument of social justice on earth – not only in Latin America, I would have thought, but everywhere else too. At a less grand level of hierarchy, let us take the very recent statement of a Roman Catholic priest who declared that: ‘Social Justice is as important as worship. That is as religious as the prayers we offer in church.’

Obviously, there are intermediate positions on commitment to social justice possible, which lie between the pope’s – that of not ignoring situations of social inequity and that of the priest quoted above which regards commitment to social justice to be as important as worship or prayer; and they have been taken by various churches, or individuals among them. But they all seem to assume that social justice is an important goal.