

# The Christian and the State

Geoffrey Brennan

with comments by

John K. Williams and W.R. Stent

What should be the nature of social and political action which flows from Christian commitment? This question is one that faces members of churches today with increasing urgency. The issues discussed in this Paper are relevant to the question, not only to practising Christians, but also to others who arrive at their attitudes to social and economic matters through the dictates of strongly-felt compassion towards the needy and suffering.

ISBN 0 949769 11 8 ISSN 0155-7386

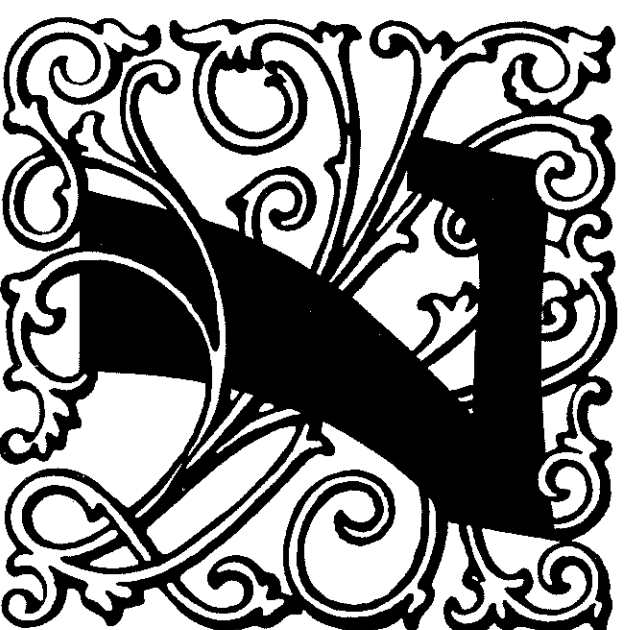
CIS Occasional Papers 7

# The Christian and the State

Geoffrey Brennan

with comments by

John K. Williams and W.R. Stent



**CIS**

Occasional Papers

## THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

The CIS is an independent Australian economic and social research institute concerned with the principles underlying a free and open society. An essential requirement for a healthy free society is that public policy decisions should not be dominated by one particular view or set of views. If ideas are not tested by competition then public policy decisions may undermine rather than support the foundations of a free society. For too long in Australia, most teaching, research and inquiry has taken place under the auspices of government. In general, this research has accepted government intervention and control as a principle of policy action. It is, therefore, concerned more with how government intervention can be accomplished, than with whether it is justified in the first place. The CIS is uniquely placed in providing real competition to this type of research.

In encouraging competition in ideas, the Centre for Independent Studies:

- \* conducts research on its own account
- \* encourages outside scholars to investigate important issues and develop programs of research
- \* publishes the results of its researches
- \* provides forums for the public discussion of important social issues
- \* promotes the results of its studies to the public-at-large

The research work of the CIS is assisted by a Council of Advisers and supervised by a Research Committee. Members of the Advisory Council include:

Professor H. W. Arndt	Professor F. A. Hayek
Professor Ray Ball	Professor Warren Hogan
Professor R. J. Blandy	T. H. Kewley
Professor Lauchlan Chipman	Dr Naomi Moldofsky
Professor Kenneth Clements	Professor R. R. Officer
Professor Malcolm Fisher	Professor Ross Parish
Dr Knud Haakonssen	Professor C. G. F. Simkin
Professor R. M. Hartwell	Professor Cliff Walsh

The Centre is constituted as a non-profit company limited by guarantee and is independent of any political party or group. It is financed by sales of its publications and by voluntary subscriptions and contributions from individuals, organisations and companies.

Executive Director  
Greg Lindsay

Orders for publications and subscription enquiries should be addressed to:

The Centre for Independent Studies,  
575 Pacific Highway, St. Leonards, NSW, 2065.  
Telephone (02) 4384377

## The Christian and the State

CIS Occasional Papers 7

# **The Christian and the State**

**Geoffrey Brennan**

with comments by

John K. Williams and W. R. Stent



THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES  
1983

First published April 1983 by

The Centre for Independent Studies

*All rights reserved*

Views expressed in the publications of the Centre for Independent Studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, Advisers, Trustees, Directors or officers.

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Brennan, Geoffrey, 1944-.  
The Christian and the State.

Bibliography.  
ISBN 0 949769 11 8.

I. Church and social problems. I. Williams, John, 1940-. II. Stent, W.R. III. Centre for Independent Studies (Australia). IV. Title (Series: CIS occasional papers; 7)

261.1

# Contents

The Authors	vi
Preface	vii
The Christian and the State Geoffrey Brennan	1
Comments John K. Williams	17
Comments W. R. Stent	23
Response Geoffrey Brennan	32

# The Authors

**Geoffrey Brennan** has been Professor of Economics at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University since 1978. He was previously Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Reader in Public Finance at the Australian National University from 1968–1978 and a Full-time Research Consultant to the Australian Taxation Review Committee 1973–74. His main research and teaching interests are in public finance, welfare economics and public choice. He is the joint editor of *The Economics of Federalism* (1980) and joint author with James M. Buchanan of *The Power to Tax: Analytical Foundations of a Fiscal Constitution* (1980).

**The Reverend Dr John K. Williams** is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. Prior to his ordination he tutored in philosophy at the University of Melbourne, and has been a visiting lecturer at several U.S. universities and theological colleges. He was chaplain to and a senior teacher at a Victorian Uniting Church College for eleven years, resigning from that post in 1981. He has published numerous articles on educational, theological, philosophical and political themes.

**Bill Stent** is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at La Trobe University and has been a Visiting Fellow at the Development Studies Centre of the Australian National University. A graduate of Melbourne, Oxford and La Trobe Universities, Dr Stent is a specialist in Development Economics. As well as having taught at several universities, he has had 'field' experience in Papua New Guinea and Uganda. He is an Anglican.

# Preface

Occasional Paper 7 results from two Occasional Seminars held in August 1982. The principal paper by Professor Geoffrey Brennan was delivered at both, with the first of the seminars in Melbourne hearing comments by the Rev. Dr John Williams and the second seminar in Canberra hearing comments by Dr W. R. Stent. Professor Brennan was invited to respond to the two commentators and the four papers are included here.

Each speaker addresses in his own way a problem which has again become central to many Christians: namely, the nature of the social and political action which should flow out of Christian commitment. All three speakers share a strong belief in political commitment, in what past generations of Christians have called the active life, rather than the contemplative.

The problem is, of course, not only relevant to practising Christians, since it will encompass also the moral predicament of all those who – whether Christian or not – arrive at their own political positions through the dictates of strongly-felt compassion toward the needy and the suffering.

Professor Brennan, in the principal paper, refers in the American context to the activities of the 'Moral Majority' and the 'liberation theologians'. Australians familiar with some of the activities of, for example, the Festival of Light, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, and the Australian Council of Churches will be familiar with some of the political positions he refers to.

Brennan concentrates on two aspects of the problem. First, within a Christian context, he attempts to make a distinction between one's obligations toward others, and other's rights over oneself, and thus to show that even if an obligation to the poor is a religious imperative it gives no rights to the poor (or to government) over the rich. Secondly and quite separately, he discusses the mechanics of government as a vehicle for redistribution, and shows that – whatever the reason for our assigning to it the power to redistribute – government is not necessarily likely to redistribute from rich to poor, and even if it does it is not likely to do so very efficiently.

Comments by the other two speakers follow, in which Williams agrees with Brennan's arguments, adding historical depth, while Stent strongly challenges the Christian basis of Brennan's ethical stance.

The moral of these papers is that made by Williams and concerns a rather broader consideration than the particular arguments put forward. It concerns the responsibilities of churches and churchmen who enter the political arena. It is a plea, firstly, that they try very hard to get their diagnosis of society's ills right. It is a plea, secondly, that, whatever the diagnosis, they try to understand the consequences of their prescription. They should try to understand in particular whether their recommended remedies will make us more free or less, and richer or poorer, and to understand that the two questions may be related.

The Centre for Independent Studies does not necessarily endorse any of the opinions advanced in these papers. In recommending them to the participants in an important contemporary debate we might, however, add in injunction: 'He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.' (Proverbs, 15:32)

**Greg Lindsay**

# The Christian and the State\*

Geoffrey Brennan

## I. INTRODUCTION

Recently I was asked by my Bishop to chair a newly formed Diocesan Commission on Church and Society. Although I was genuinely flattered by this invitation, and although in principle I ought to have felt reasonably well equipped for such office, I was in fact rather reluctant. The truth of the matter is that I have for some time felt increasingly out of step with much of the ecclesial establishment's pronouncements on social issues, and I surely did not want to place myself in a context where similar pronouncements would be expected of me. On the other hand, I have little sympathy with those pietistic escapists who claim that the Christian ought not have anything to do with politics, that he ought to fix his eyes firmly on the next world without much attention to the current one.

So, for better or worse, I have accepted the Bishop's invitation. And this has committed me to a more thorough exploration both of my own views and of those views (currently so fashionable in the church) that I regard as unsatisfactory. This paper can be construed as part of that exploration.

When I speak of the Church (capital C) in what follows, I shall mean the ecclesial establishment – I shall be concerned with the social statements of houses of bishops, synods, offices

\* I am grateful to Loren Lomasky for comments on the penultimate draft, by which he saved me from some overstatement and one technical error. He is of course entirely absolved from responsibility for either the views expressed or any remaining errors: he doubtless has sins enough of his own.

of social affairs, national and international councils of church leaders, the Vatican and so on. I shall leave aside the question of whether these statements are representative of the views of Christians as a whole, or whether the views of the vast body of self-styled Christians are in any case relevant. I am concerned only with the political, moral and theological underpinnings of the views publicly expressed by the 'Church' as defined.

Generally speaking, there are two sorts of positions that are currently common. The first is what I would term 'liberal' in the American sense, 'socialist' in the Australian and European sense. As one member of the World Council of Churches secretariat is reputed to have remarked, 'Oh well, we're **all** socialists here'. Or in the terms of William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, 'For the Christian there are two options – socialism or heresy'. The recent papal statement on work reflects a somewhat similar socialist flavour. And the remarkable cachet which South American 'liberation theology' seems to have assumed in many circles, the calls of the World Council of Churches for a 'new international economic order' – all these things bespeak an apparently wide-spread conviction that Christianity faithfully pursued leads inexorably to the primacy of 'social justice' among political ideals, and that some form of socialism is the only way in which such social justice can be secured.

Recently (and probably predictably) there has begun to emerge a strong counter-movement to the 'liberal' stance of the establishment churches. Not far from where I live in Southwest Virginia, Jerry Falwell and his Liberty Baptist machine are vocal advocates of a much more traditionally conservative stance on social issues. In the American setting, this group pushes strongly for the 'old-fashioned Christian virtues' – for the integrity of the family, for prayer in state schools, for vigorous censorship, and for 'Christian education' (e.g., the teaching of 'creationism' in lieu of evolution, and the like). Theologically, this tradition is fiercely evangelical, in most cases fundamentalist. Numerically, it is growing very rapidly while the traditional denominations are declining at a significant rate. Although not yet of influence comparable with the traditional churches, the Moral Majority (as they bravely style themselves) are already a political force to be reckoned with – or at least claim themselves to be.

Being 'compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses', one tends to feel somewhat beleaguered. Socialism on the one hand, 'moral' censoriousness on the other; it is surely tempting to demand that the Church abandon politics entirely – that it

return to its liturgy, its prayers and its patient ministry to individual souls, where its true strength and true calling lie. It is also tempting to observe that the Church's record in politics has been at best highly ambiguous. It seems to me, however, that any such retreat is quite unacceptable theologically. What is wrong with the ecclesial establishment and the moral majoritarians equally is not their **involvement** in political issues but their common presuppositions about the moral and practical dimensions of the exercise of political power. And in this respect what is important about both positions, as I see it, is not their ideological diversity but rather what they **share**. For, as I see it, the ecclesial establishment and the moral majoritarians are very much more alike than they often may seem. Both have lost sight of that delicate sense of self-denial in the exercise of power that is fundamental to proper conduct both in personal and social affairs, and which represents the crucial ingredient in a genuinely free political order.

There is, I suppose, nothing unusual about this. Those who believe in freedom as the prime characteristic of a tolerable political order have always had a delicate row to hoe, particularly among those with strong moral convictions. And if, in some measure, we share those convictions, then we seem to be in the curious bind of urging tolerance for the patently intolerable, of offering a moral defence of the morally indefensible. This is, however, the bind that we accept for ourselves and it is one that I believe is totally congruent with our Christian convictions – indeed, as I see it, is required by them. In this paper, I aim to sketch out a defence of that claim.

That defence has two strands: a theological one, and a practical one. The theological strand is not, I think, particularly exceptionable – it seems to me, at least, to be fairly faithful to traditional orthodoxy. But I am not a professional theologian – merely a person attempting to be faithful to his own spiritual sensibilities. It may therefore be that I have made some basic errors in this.

The practical matters I feel more confident about. Although the views that I shall put here are not by any means universally accepted, they have at least been exposed to the scrutiny of fellow-professionals and I am accustomed to defending them.

My chief target here will be the proponents of 'social justice'. In the tradition which I come from, they represent a much more formidable foe than the moral majoritarians, with whom I have relatively little in common either politically or theologically. Moreover, there is much that is attractive in the 'social justice'

position and its basic theological premises I find totally congenial. In what follows, I shall attempt to spell out what I see to be the theological base from which the 'social justice' prophets argue, to show the sense in which they and the moral majoritarians are alike, and to isolate why both are practically and theologically unsound.

## II. RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

The point of departure for prophets of social justice is the claim that all Christians have a moral obligation to the poor and needy of the world. I do not dispute this claim in any way. It seems to me that it would take much double-think to do so. The biblical record seems entirely clear on this matter,<sup>1</sup> and makes it clear further that this obligation is in no way limited by national and geographic boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

A second claim (often implicit) is that traditional concepts of justice, depending as they do on arguments about *desert* are inappropriate for the Christian because, for the Christian, nothing with which God (or nature) happens to endow him is a matter of his own desert but of God's grace. Accordingly, no one can make a just claim to any property he happens to have, because he does not deserve it. On this reckoning, the entire moral undergirding of private property in the Lockean (and one might add of close theft in the Marxian) tradition is swept away. One must therefore turn to one's insights about obligations to the poor to determine the moral legitimacy of individuals' claims on property – and hence the criterion for rightful ownership becomes one of 'need', somehow defined.<sup>3</sup>

It would, of course, be entirely inappropriate to require of the proponents of this position a complete definition of the concept of need, or a specification of what distribution of total

income (or wealth) the approach would entail. For the theory to be a guide to action, all that is required is that we can recognise clear violations of the principle and act to correct them. We can therefore sweep away many irritating details and simply focus on the broad principles.

My criticism of this line of reasoning is equally broad and conceptual.

The point of departure is a distinction that seems to me fundamental in moral discourse between the concept of an **obligation** and that of a **right**. Rights are the basic subject matter of **justice**, and here I shall define rights as those (moral) claims that individuals make on one another that are properly to be enforced by the exercise of state power. Rights so defined include the rights of individuals against others when those others operate under state aegis, as well as in their private capacities. Now, all rights so defined logically imply corresponding obligations to respect those rights. But, as I see it, the reverse is not true, and is certainly not congruent with a Christian view of things. That is, one may possess many obligations that are not attached to rights, and many of the Christian's most important obligations are of this type.

In the Good Samaritan parable, for example, Jesus makes it clear that there is a moral obligation to assist the man who fell among thieves. How else could the priest and Levite be blameworthy? But this obligation arises not because the man who fell among thieves has a **right** to be helped, but because helping the less fortunate is a requirement of the moral code under which a good man operates. In a basic sense, the whole thrust of Christian morality – turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, forgiving one's brother seventy-times-seven – is that proper conduct spills out of the extravagance of Christian love; what is required is a life of **grace**, in which one's acts are the outcome of faithfulness to the vision of God's will for His world and are not to be justified merely by appeal to the merits or deservingness of others. To take the most extreme case, God's love for man is a prime attribute of **God**; it is not *bonne* of man's right to be loved!

Therefore, to say that the rich have an obligation to give to the poor – which they clearly do – is not to imply that the poor have a right to the rich man's possessions. There is, for example, no implication in the eighth commandment that it is acceptable for me to take something that is not mine provided that I take it from someone richer than me: I do not acquire a right to your property **because** you may have an obligation to

<sup>1</sup> Attempts have been made to dispute it – by economists among others – on the grounds that it is technically impossible to improve the lot of the poor. The younger Parson Mathus is one notable example. Such arguments, relating to the consequences of acts undertaken for moral reasons, are entirely to the point, but I shall ignore them.

<sup>2</sup> And possibly even familial ones. Jesus makes it clear that the commandments (including the fourth) have only presumptive authority and can be over-ridden by the higher claims of the 'law of love'.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of this general position, see Philip Wogaman, *Theological Perspectives on Economics*, (Fraser Institute, Vancouver, 1982).

give it to me. Accordingly, no immediate moral case for politically coerced redistribution can be established on the basis of an argument based solely on the **obligations** of the rich: any argument about social justice is an argument about giving individuals what is **rightfully theirs**. In fact, the argument about the obligations of the rich in some ways presupposes that the rich do indeed **own** their riches: it is an argument concerning what they should do with what is theirs.

Now, this does not rule out the possibility of a legitimate argument for politically-orchestrated redistribution based solely on acknowledgement of an obligation to be charitable. There may be practical reasons why those so obliged may choose to fulfill their obligations **collectively** rather than individually – compassion may be expressed politically. But it must be emphasised that such collective compassion can only be permitted up to a point that is consistent with the consent of the donors. Beyond that point, we are in the business of using political power to **coerce** individuals into fulfilling their obligations; and at this point, it seems to me, the social justice proponents and the moral majoritarians leap into the same camp.

For most Christians would acknowledge not only an obligation to give to the poor but also an obligation to read one's Bible, to develop a spiritual discipline (including an appropriate prayer life) and so on. Should we on this basis pass a law that would make the latter activities compulsory? Moral majoritarians would doubtless be inclined to say so, provided we can devise appropriate monitoring procedures to ensure that the activities are pursued conscientiously. Why, if the recognised obligation is all that is at stake, would the social justice proponents not? Why is the obligation to be 'charitable' different from the obligation to say one's prayers in this crucial respect? Why is the former amenable to governmental enforcement and the latter not?

Two arguments might be made in this connection. The first is that social justice takes moral and theological precedence over these other ends, including ends traditionally closely linked with the salvation of individual souls. In other words, the prophets of social justice genuinely believe that material equality is more important than more overtly spiritual concerns. It seems to me, however, that without in any way denying the importance of material considerations, the biblical record would not support any such ordering of priorities.

The second argument is that saintliness is not amenable to political pursuit – that one cannot legislate individuals into the

kingdom of heaven, and that it is either morally improper or practically useless, or both, to try to do so. But this argument, if used against the moral majoritarians, is presumably relevant also for those who want to legislate compassion. And it needs to be shown why it is **not** relevant if we are to make any connection at all between the obligation to have concern for the poor and needy on the one hand, and the securing of 'social justice' by using the coercive powers of the state on the other. In other words, there is on the face of things a great logical gulf fixed between the obligations of compassion and the securing of 'social justice' (as here defined) that the prophets of social justice must bridge.

Correctly interpreted, 'social justice' is a matter of the proper use of political power. In some senses, the fundamental question for the Christian, as he contemplates political affairs, is this: why is theocracy **not** the best form of government? What basis can we adduce for the classical liberal stance of defending the individual's rights under law for doing morally reprehensible acts (i.e., not being faithful to his Christian obligations)?

### III. POLITICAL LIBERTY AS A BIBLICAL IDEAL

It is hardly the place here to try to spell out a theological defence of political liberty, even if I were equipped to do it, which I am not. But there are some pieces of that defence which seem to me to be central, and which are worth fixing one's mind on for a moment or two.

Christians properly focus on the idea of God's plan for man's salvation and His provision of the means whereby it may be secured. Sometimes, however, we seem to forget that God also permits us the power to secure our own **damnation**; and that the right to secure damnation is something which God established for us from the first and which He, despite His omnipotence, vows Himself not to violate. This is, as the Eastern Orthodox are inclined to put it, a 'great mystery'. God both loves men and permits them to do themselves eternal harm. There is in this something fundamental about the Christian understanding of human liberty. For if it is God-like to love men, it is also God-like to relish their independence and autonomy. Just as the good parent takes joy in the emerging independence and 'otherness' of his own children – even when their integrity is costly to him/herself – so God loves and frees men, treating them not as slaves but as 'sons' and 'heirs'. In the same way, it is good for men to relish the integrity and otherness of

others; to do so involves refraining from the use of power one may have over them, and to so refrain even when one could compel them for their own good.

But the Christian does not depend merely on philosophical speculation about the problem of evil to indicate the nature of God's exercise of His power. We have at hand the record of what we take to be the supreme entry of God into human affairs – the life of Jesus. And what seems most striking, on the face of things, about that life is how paralytically 'low-key' it all is. There are, to be sure, intimations of power (in the miracles, for example); but the overall thrust of Jesus' life is that, omnipotent or not, God reveals Himself to men as the servant, the one who empties Himself, the one who makes Himself of no account and who is obedient even to death. The outrageous truth about God revealed in the gospel is this paradox of power – power may be possessed but is ceded away. God's action reveals a deliberate choice to take on powerlessness in his dealings with men. And it seems to me that we are called to do likewise. In other words, the recognition of the sanctity of another's personhood is a vital precondition, **before** the issue of moral action can be addressed.

This fact provides us with an answer to the question as to why theocracy is not necessarily the best form of government for the Christian. To be obedient to its calling, the Church must be a voluntaristic institution. To assume the control of political power, even for the best of all possible reasons, is at root inconsistent with the nature of Godly action. The Church *qua* the body of Christ must abjure it.

Of course, this does not require of the Church any sort of **doctrinal** equivocation. Nor does it deny the Church a prophetic role. But the prophet stands intrinsically outside the order towards which he speaks prophetically – and so must the Church. Equally clearly, power over others will exist, of necessity, under **all** political orders; and the Christian may well find himself in the position of having to exercise such power. The point to be made here is that the use of such power to achieve desirable ends is at best only presumptively desirable. The biblical view suggests quite clearly that even when one possesses the power to 'do good' it may be desirable to refrain from using it.

#### IV. POLITICAL LIBERTY AND MORAL PRUDENCE

There is another aspect of the biblical understanding of things that deserves mention in the context of political matters. It

relates not so much to the understanding and use of political power, but rather to the capacities of such power – to **natural** rather than moral limits. This aspect can be encapsulated in the simple proposition that there is no salvation to be found in politics. No political system, however apparently good, can make an **ultimate** claim on the Christian's loyalty. There is **no** uniquely 'right' system that can be given cosmic sanction in the sense that it is the single manifestation of God's kingdom on earth. Jesus himself makes this clear: 'My kingdom is **not** of this world'. Political orders may be better or worse, more or less just, more or less peaceable, more or less humane – but none is the source of our hope. 'Some put their trust in horses, and some in chariots; but we will remember the name of the Lord, our God.'

Relatedly, **all** political arrangements, like all aspects of the affairs of men, are imperfect. Men will still sin, still exploit others, still covet – even under the best of human institutions. (No-one who is active in church affairs will deny the relevance of this among the body of the faithful, for example). Nor is the Christian called to a heroic view of man. The strength of the promise that calls us into what we are to **be**, depends on our seeing ourselves as we currently are. We are under no obligations, or so it seems to me, to try to design human institutions that take no account of human reality – which means, in particular, the reality of human moral frailty. Indeed, the Christian is in some ways much better equipped to come to terms with the wickedness of men than are others: the Christian expects nothing else. In other words, the Christian is denied the pietistic escapism of the utopian – he must deal with the world as it is, as best he may.

It follows from this that no decisive case **against** a human institution can be made solely on the grounds that it is imperfect. Specifically, no criticism of the market order (or any other), however telling, is sufficient in itself to enable us to conclude that that order may not be the best available (whatever 'best' may be construed to mean). We would have to argue, in addition, that there exists some alternative institutional arrangement that is **not** susceptible (or less so) to the criticism made, and is in addition not unacceptable on some other grounds.

To put the point in language more congenial to the economist, the domain of practical ethics is the set of **feasible** alternatives and no ultimately satisfactory ethical judgment can be made without an examination of the entire set.

It seems to me important to be very clear about all this, because popular discussion of social issues is often extremely

sloppy on precisely this point and the sloppiness has implications for the sort of political position that seems to emerge. In particular, it is commonly remarked, when something is observed to be 'wrong' in human affairs, that 'the government' ought to do something to improve things. And such a remark is entirely understandable. As a disembodied moral injunction, it is in fact, quite unexceptionable – if something is wrong, someone ought indeed do something to correct it, and since the government is typically the institution which **could** act appropriately if the relevant power were assigned, then to say that 'the government' should do something becomes just another way of saying that something is wrong. But somehow there seems to have slipped into the remark an altogether gratuitous assumption that, if the 'government' were to be assigned the power to correct things, it would act in the morally desired direction. No such assumption seems warranted. At the same time, those who query the virtues of government intervention are often enough seen to be querying the desirability of morally appropriate action, when all they may be doing is querying the presumption that governments will **in fact** act morally.

Accordingly, the general case for a free political order is as much the case against its alternatives as it is an extolling of any peculiar virtues of liberty as an end. In this connection, I am reminded of a well-known remark by Maurice Chevalier, who was once asked how he was enjoying old age. 'It's not so bad,' he replied, 'when you contemplate the alternative!' Modest though it may seem, a defence of liberty of this sort is totally adequate, and is one with which the Christian ought to feel tolerably comfortable.

## V. FROM THEOLOGY TO POLITICAL ECONOMY

It may be useful at this point to summarise the argument so far. I have argued that one cannot derive a case for 'social justice' (in the sense of coerced redistribution through the agency of the state) solely on the basis of an obligation on the part of the rich to give to the poor – though I do positively assert the existence of such an obligation.

I have argued that there is at stake in the demands for 'social justice' a prior proposition about the appropriate use of political power. I have, in this connection, suggested two aspects of Christian understanding that seem to me to be relevant. The first involves the observation that God, in His dealings with

men, does not ultimately violate their integrity: He leaves them with the freedom to secure their own damnation, notwithstanding the extremity of His love (even unto death). There is, it seems to me, something telling here in relation to a Christian understanding of the use of power over others, even when one desires to do good.

The second emphasises the essential moral ambiguity of men. If men are as likely to do evil as good, what moral case if any exists for assigning power to men over others in the organisation of political institutions? In the remainder of this paper, I want to address this latter question specifically. In doing so, I want to draw out a distinction, implicit so far, between two separate domains of ethical enquiry. One is concerned with the question: how should one act within a well-defined set of institutional rules? The other is concerned with what the rules should be. In any particular case, both questions are typically relevant: action in accordance with moral norms will often be in tension 'behave as you think best' – is not generally a very satisfactory rule.

The analysis of alternative sets of rules – of possible social orders – represents an exercise in 'social science', broadly conceived. In particular, we might talk of a 'science of rules', or generalised jurisprudence, as being the central exercise in the study of rules. I conceive this task to be a major thrust of 'political economy' in the classical English sense, and I shall use that term here. I do so because it seems to me that the ultimate preoccupation of the English liberal philosophers, from Hobbes through Hume and Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill, was the design of political institutions that would make for the most tolerable life for the citizens who lived under them. The liberal political/economic order based on the operation of the free market seemed to them to represent the set of rules most conducive to a tolerable life, largely because they believed that the only reasonable assumption about the nature of human behaviour to be made is that individuals who are assigned power under any political order will always be inclined to exploit that power for their own ends. This view at least seems congruent with Christian understanding. Where the classical political economists, Mill particularly, tended to depart from ecclesial orthodoxy was in their insistence that it is precisely where political agents exercise their authority in accord with their moral (and religious) passions that they are likely to do the most harm.

In any case, if the distinction between a morality of action and a morality of rules can be drawn, it suggests what I regard as an important difference in the assumptions about human behaviour appropriate to the different domains of moral discourse. When one is involved in moral discourse in a particular political setting it seems natural to assume that individuals will act in accord with their moral sensibilities. If one 'preaches' to the players, one naturally takes it that those players will be sensitive to the moral advice given. If you and I are to engage in a dialogue about how I should act, or to reflect on how people more generally (voters, for example) should act, we more or less take it as given that each **will** act in the moral way, or will be more likely to so act: otherwise, the whole exercise is idle speculation.

But when we examine the working properties of alternative institutional structures, we must necessarily make assumptions about human behaviour that are rather different. We cannot afford the luxury of assuming men to be angels. We must necessarily concern ourselves with the issue of how to minimise the harm that a man can do to his fellows when internal moral constraints on his behaviour are inoperative. For this reason, we aim to establish a set of rules that will constrain the actions of men so that even when they act in narrow self-interest the outcomes will be tolerably acceptable. Electoral constraints in a democratic order, for example, are designed to ensure that those men who lust for political power for its own sake will be constrained by the need to appeal to the citizens.<sup>4</sup> Market constraints in a free market setting ensure that those with a passion for wealth and financial aggrandisement will have to work in the interests of their customers, and so on. The study of alternative systems of constraints – how they 'work' in the sense specified – is a matter for social science, and for 'political economy' specifically. One cannot simply **assume**, for example, that to assign to the political process the power to redistribute without limit will necessarily lead to a more equal distribution of income – one must **argue** it. So that even setting aside the moral issues of whether such power ought to be used, and whether a more equal nominal distribution of income is a prime moral end, one is confronted with the purely analytic issue of whether the end will be achieved in the manner indicated.

<sup>4</sup> How well such constraints work under majoritarian politics is, of course, a moot question. Modern public choice analysis indicates that they operate rather poorly.

Let me, by way of conclusion, offer some relevant observations on this particular issue. At first sight, the fact that all voters have exactly one vote each seems to imply that the distribution of political power is much more equal than the distribution of income. Hence, to permit the political process to exercise a major hand in redistribution will necessarily lead to a more equal division of the 'total pie'.

Setting aside questions about the usefulness or otherwise of the pie analogy, and the extent to which the size of the pie is contingent on the amount redistributed, there are several important aspects of majoritarian electoral constraints to which we need to attend. First, we should emphasise that the distribution of political power among voters does not reveal anything about the distribution of political power between voters as a group and political agents (politicians, bureaucrats and the like) as a group. To the extent that genuine political power resides in the hands of the latter, redistribution will reflect the interests and inclinations of those persons rather than the equality of voting power.

Second, as emphasised by modern public choice scholars, majority rule permits any majority coalition to exploit a minority; the composition of that majority coalition may not be stable and it does not predictably always involve the poor as members. A simple example here may illustrate. Let A be the situation that exists in the absence of political redistribution, in a simple polity composed of three homogeneous groups of equal size. The groups I denote by 1, 2 and 3. Each polity is characterised by the pay-off received by each group. I assume that groups are essentially interested in the return to themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the policy alternatives B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>3</sub> indicated in Table 1. Note that any of the B policies defeats A under majority rule. Note also that no one of the B policies defeats both the others – that is, it is no more likely under majority rule (and ignoring other possible constraints on the tax and spending side) that the poor will be net beneficiaries than that the rich will be. If, for example, two competing parties are choosing a policy platform so as to maximise the chances of being elected they are no more likely to choose to redistribute from rich to poor than they are to redistribute from poor to rich.

Furthermore, politically relevant divisions within the electorate are not by any means restricted to income groups. The

<sup>5</sup> The pay-off may include in principle some value for the altruistic concern for others' returns. Providing the extent of altruism is small, no problems are involved.

TABLE 1

Policy	Return to		
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
A (total laissez-faire)	30,000	20,000	10,000
B <sub>1</sub>	0	22,000	38,000
B <sub>2</sub>	40,000	0	20,000
B <sub>3</sub>	35,000	25,000	0

relevant partitioning may be on the basis of factor groups (labour vs capital vs land), or industry groups (manufacturing vs agriculture vs services) or geographic regions (particularly under a system of geographical electorates) or age groups or religious affiliation or whatever. It is simply the case that many policies designed to increase chances of election involve special interest legislation – and the putting together of an appropriate coalition of such special interest policies is very largely what majoritarian electoral competition is all about.

When one considers the vast bulk of government programmes – including tariff policy, agricultural price support schemes, subsidies to higher education, subsidies to health (most of which go to the suppliers, i.e., doctors), housing subsidies and so on, in **addition** to 'welfare' payments – it is by no means obvious that the net effect of government action is to redistribute towards the poor. If the tax system is roughly proportional (as it tends to be in most countries, including Australia) and if the distributional effect on the receipts side is roughly random in relation to income, then perhaps on average the net expected effect of the whole of budgetary operations is towards equalisation. But such an effect is hardly systematic: many poor will be net losers, many rich net gainers, and the total effect may well be that on average individuals are worse off in the process. In an interesting recent book, Julian le Grand had looked at the distributional effects of the major public welfare programmes in the U.K., and concluded that their effects are generally somewhat 'regressive' (i.e., the rich typically do very much better out of them than the poor).

Now, one must be careful how one interprets all this. It certainly does not imply that if we were to abolish the whole welfare apparatus then income distribution would instantly become more equal. Nor does it imply that, on average, some government programmes are not more equalising than others. And it does not imply that, in principle, governments could not redistribute from rich to the poor if they chose to. What it does imply is that there is nothing about the logic of majority rule that **requires** such an outcome. And indeed, parties that systematically attempt such an outcome will expect to be out of office more often than they are in.

If we seek to ensure major systematic redistribution to the poor, therefore, we must change the rules of the political game in some fashion. This is a point the Marxists at least seem always to have recognised. But we must be careful not to confuse what is **necessary** with what is **sufficient**. Once the power to redistribute is exempted from electoral constraint, can we reasonably expect that the end result will be redistribution in the direction that is morally desirable? What is it about the assignment of political power that confers sainthood upon the holder? We may wish that it were true. We may hope that it might be true. We may talk to our 'representatives' (and want them to talk to us) as if it were true. But it is not true – and Christians, of all people, ought to recognise that it is not.

In one sense, this is to recognise no more than what the economists, and for that matter the theologians, have always insisted: that the world is an imperfect place and that moral choice is always a choice between imperfect alternatives. When the 'best' set of political institutions is chosen it will still be imperfect, and it will often render impossible the morally best outcomes. If our pursuit of those 'best outcomes' is so fierce that we destroy the rules under which we play the game, then we are, I believe, truly lost.

When the Christian chooses to enter the political arena – and I do not believe he can conscientiously do otherwise – he ought to do so with some sense of the rules of the game he is to play. If those rules are not the best among the set that seems feasible, he is right to work to change them. But if they are the best available rules, then moral action must of necessity take account of the need to preserve them. This is not to say, of course, that there may not be cases in which, for example, a man ought to break the law to secure a higher good. But the securing of a higher good is by no means sufficient grounds for

breaking the law; and the violator who breaks the law has no right not to be punished simply on the grounds that he was morally **right** to act as he did. It does seem to me that a rather sharp distinction between the morality of **rules** and the morality of **action** has to be drawn if we are to make proper sense of all this. And the Church has shown little sense of the need for such a distinction or the relevance of the former category.

It is in this sort of setting that the libertarian takes his stand – for minimising the exercise of state power, for conceiving government in the role of ‘umpire’ not the major player, for encouraging individuals to see their own lives and their own projects (rather than everyone else’s) as the proper domain for the exercise of their power, for recognising the right and the responsibility and the ultimate necessity of each to work at his own salvation in his own way with his own fear and trembling.

# Comments

John K. Williams

Commenting upon Professor Brennan’s address is a singular privilege but a daunting task. As a churchman I am profoundly grateful for the theological acuity with which he defended what could be called a piece of libertarian folk-wisdom: never give to a friend in government power you would not willingly cede to an enemy in government. It was salutary to be reminded, in effect, that the very Old Testament prophets who so scathingly criticised the wealthy for their indifference to the needy hurled not a few barbed comments in the direction of the ‘shepherds’ – that is, the rulers. Indeed, when the Israelite people, envious of surrounding nations who boasted powerful monarchs, decided that they too would have a king, the prophet Samuel, anything but enthusiastic, said this:

This will be the manner of the king who would reign over you. He will take your sons and make them his charioteers . . . He will take your fields and your vineyards and give them to his supporters. He will take a tenth of your produce and give it to his staff.<sup>1</sup>

What was intended as a terrifying prospect – a ruler taking one tenth of his subjects’ produce – sounds today a singularly attractive proposition!

I am not only encouraged by **what** Professor Brennan said but by the simple fact that it was said and that the Centre for Independent Studies arranged this seminar. For I hold that church bodies must start listening carefully to a wide range of

<sup>1</sup> From 1 Samuel, chapter 8:11–15

economic viewpoints if they are not, unwittingly, to advocate specific policies and proposals which could compound, rather than contribute to the rectification of, many social ills. Many statements from such bodies presuppose the truth of economic theories largely rejected by contemporary economists, yet which have become 'filters' through which many church-people – and many members of the 'new class' as such – perceive social reality. This perception affects not simply ecclesiastical attitudes to specific economic proposals, but to the worlds of industry and commerce as such. The person involved in such worlds is perceived much as Homer perceived the trader; you might recall that Homer's Odysseus was goaded to fury and action when characterised by that despised term:

I would not say you were like a man skilled  
In contests of the many sorts that exist among men,  
But are like one . . . with his mind on a load, an overseer of  
cargoes,  
And of gain got by greed.

This filtering role of specific economic theories is nowhere more obvious than in the writings of the so-called 'liberation theologians' to whom Professor Brennan referred. And make no mistake about it: these thinkers are exercising an influence out of all proportion to their number. They take as self-evident truths a Marxian theory of surplus value and a Leninist theory of neo-colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Given a relatively free market in a liberal state there *must* be, so they assert, the exploiters and the exploited. The wealthy accumulate their plenty by plundering the poor. The affluence of developed nations is acquired by defrauding the Third World.<sup>3</sup> Hence the alleged 'right' of the poor to take what property is theirs. Were such theologians to re-write the parable of the Good Samaritan they would not post, as early Christian socialists may have, a 'Better Samaritan' who, observing the wounded traveller, hot-footed it back to Jerusalem, called out

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, New York, 1973); Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, (Orbis Books, New York, 1974); Juan L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Orbis Books, New York, 1973); D. Soelle, *Political Theology* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1974).  
<sup>3</sup> No 'liberation theologian' or church division of 'social justice' has, to my knowledge, addressed P. Bauer's *Equality, The Third World and Economic Delusion* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981) or the many papers of J. Ramos dealing with the economic situation in Latin America (*Liberation North – Liberation South*, ed. M. Novak, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, 1981).

the militia, extracted money from other wealthy Samaritans, and set up an 'aid-to-wounded-travellers' benefit. The liberation theologian would postulate a 'Best Samaritan' who would conclude that the victim of theft must have been fairly wealthy in the first place, was undoubtedly the beneficiary of an unjust social and economic order, and that the so-called 'robbers' were really freedom fighters valiantly battling against 'institutional violence'. He would therefore urge those concerned for social justice to fund the robbers: through, perhaps, the World Council of Samaritan Synagogues.

I admit I slightly caricature, but that in essence is what many liberation theologians are saying. And what they say explicitly – that a market economy in a liberal state inevitably generates exploited and exploiting within a given nation, and exploited and exploiting nations globally – many church people have absorbed in a semi-conscious way. For this reason, I fear, they would be singularly unmoved by Professor Brennan's paper. Hence I implore economists, in their charity, to warn the church when it elevates into an axiom what at best is a controversial economic theory. What Lord Keynes said about the ideas of defunct economists upon 'madmen in authority' extends to 'madmen in theological seminaries'.

Bluntly, churchmen need to be 'sensitised' to the explicit or implicit appeal within many works addressing issues of 'social justice'<sup>4</sup> to anything but self-evident economic theories. I would further hope that a body such as this might make three requests of churches debating economic and political issues.

1. When criticising a liberal state, or advocating some economic measure which demands an increase in the power of the state, church bodies must indicate what alternative vision of the state they *ipso facto* are favouring. We possess what many early Christian socialists did not: a dazzling array of case studies of alternative social, political, and economic orders. We have seen

<sup>4</sup> I have used the term 'social justice' even though I find it difficult to give the term much content. In my judgement, only an individual or a group can meaningfully be said to be 'just'; the word is inexorably tied, I hold, to purportive behaviour. I do not understand how a complex composition of systems of relationships can be spoken of as 'just' or 'unjust'.  
Maybe Christians should, as well as reading John Rawls, pay some attention to Robert Nozick on this difficult concept. And, of course, the writings of Friedrich A. Hayek – especially volume II of his trilogy *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973, 1976, 1979).

Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, the U.S.S.R., Maoist China, and a bewildering range of mixed economies with overtly authoritarian, allegedly socialist, and relatively liberal regimes pre- siding over the mix. When churchmen advocate some measure which increases the power of the state, let them also:

- (i) ask towards which existing political and economic order they are taking us;
- (ii) assess the lot of flesh and blood human beings living under such a political and economic order;
- (iii) consider carefully what such scholars as Allan Meltzer have argued about the inevitable growth of bureaucracies given existing political technologies.

It is simply not good enough to compare what is actual with a mere ideal. Reality must be compared with reality.

In this context Christians who favour a liberal state might do well to familiarise themselves and their fellow-believers with what the so-called 'new philosophers' of France such as Jean-Francois Revel<sup>5</sup> and Bernard Henri-Levy<sup>6</sup> are saying. They are rejecting the planned economy as a 'sham' and describing the powerful state it demands as a primary source of, rather than a bulwark against, the chief barbarisms of our day. Again, Chris- tians should contemplate the claim of Leszek Kolakowski who, writing against the background of his experience in Poland, insists that the 'new alternative society' many critics of the liberal state *de facto* advocate, is 'not only perfectly compatible with all the disasters of the capitalist world... but adds to them a series of disasters of its own... above all, the unrestrained rule of the omnipotent bureaucracy, a concentration of power never known before in human history.' (I add, in parenthesis, that theologians who take Marcuse and Bloch seriously, might find communing with volume three of Kolakowski's *Main Cur- rents of Marxism*<sup>7</sup> a valuable 'learning experience').

2. Church bodies must gently remind themselves that goods which have not been produced cannot be distributed. An ethics of production must accompany an ethics of distribution. It is

<sup>5</sup> J.-F. Revel, *Without Marx or Jesus* (MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1972); *The Totalitarian Temptation* (Doubleday, New York 1977).  
<sup>6</sup> B. Henri-Levy, *Barbarism With a Human Face* (Harper and Row, New York, 1979); *The Testament of God* (Harper and Row, New York, 1980).  
<sup>7</sup> L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: its Origins, Growth, and Dis- solution*, three volumes (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978).

arguable that the destruction of mercantilism, the industrial revolution, and the emergence of an essentially market economy, did more for the poorest, in material terms, than did some 1,800 years of preaching about charity. It is so easy to forget that life for the masses was, under mercantilism, nasty, brutish, and short. London and Paris were cursed with recurrent famine; indeed life expectancy at birth in France was, in 1800, 24 for males and 27 for females. In 1780 over 80 per cent of families in France spent 90 per cent of their income simply on bread. Yet in one century the very nature of poverty was transformed. The working populace in Britain quadrupled, and real *per capita* disposable income doubled between 1800 and 1850, and doubled again between 1850 and 1900. A sixteenfold per cent increase in wealth – in goods and services – is hardly adequately dealt with simply by sighing over the fiction of Dickens and Zola – or of Marx and Engels, for that matter.

I am **not** suggesting that church bodies should, when con- sidering the lot of the poorest, ask only which economic system to date has maximised productivity and most freed human creativity. I am, however, saying that is one of the questions that should be asked. As, I submit, should be a question as to whether a given economic proposal has, as an unintended conse- quence, a lessening of production. I underscore that churchmen *qua* churchmen have no peculiar competence to answer many of these questions, but they must acknowledge that they are real questions, important questions, and questions demanding an answer. Maybe a more appropriate task for church bodies than the provision of specific economic proposals would be the insistence that a range of questions about the short and long term effects of given economic policies for the poorest and for individual liberty appear and remain on the agendas of economists and politicians.

3. Church bodies must be **less selective** when bringing the public's attention to claimed causes of and contributors to poverty. Muttering incantations about 'avaricious businesses' and 'plundering multi-nationals' is not sufficient. Minimum wage laws, occupational licensing, high tariffs and quotas, the proliferation of regulations governing industry – what are the effects of these upon the least skilled and most vulnerable of the community? I again stress that church bodies are not compe- tent to answer such questions, but what they must **not** do is 'filter out' voices asserting that the ultimate beneficiaries of such practices are the already privileged. Again, if it be true that – and I stress that 'if' – Western democracies are locked into an

archaic political technology which inexorably benefits the bureaucracy,<sup>8</sup> churchmen should be interested in and listening to those proffering suggestions as to how the situation can be remedied. Here I am humbled by the courage of such black, ghetto-born economists as Professors Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams. They carried out their researches and articulated their conclusions knowing full well that many would dismiss them as 'Uncle Toms'. Said Professor Williams: 'Most of (the money spent fighting poverty) goes to non-poor people – bureaucrats and professionals charged with caring for the poorest. It is like feeding sparrows through horses. This is a most desirable way of feeding sparrows from the horses' point of view.' I underscore yet again that I am not suggesting for one moment that church bodies should put their *imprimatur* upon such an assertion; I merely plead that they listen to it with some care.

One final comment. Christ's commandment that we love our neighbours as ourselves clearly involves an obligation to care for the destitute and assist the needy. As argued, it demands a much more disciplined listening to and learning from economists. Yet it also implies that we crave for others what we most crave for ourselves. Christians, as a minority, crave for themselves liberty to dream their own dreams and strive to make them come true, liberty to embrace their own ideals and attempt to live by them, liberty to cherish their own vision of the 'good life' – a vision which for them centres in the Christ – and to struggle to transform that vision into a reality. If we, a minority, crave that liberty for ourselves, it is precisely that liberty we must crave for our neighbours, in full knowledge that their visions of the 'good life' may be quite other than ours. I thank Professor Brennan for so eloquently reminding us of this simple, yet so easily forgotten, truth.

<sup>8</sup> See the writings of J. M. Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, William A. Niskanen, Jr., and Thomas E. Borcherting. I also plead with church people to read and think carefully about all the volumes penned by Thomas Sowell.

## Comments

W. R. Stent

I should first like to say how pleased I am that such a distinguished economist as Geoffrey Brennan has so authoritatively asserted the relevance of Christian values to the analysis of present-day political and economic institutions. For far too long have the 'positive economists' held the field with the result that the values underlying their analyses have often been hidden from, and even denied by, their students. But, as Mishan has recently argued,

a limitation of the subject to its positive aspects has never been urged by professional economists. Indeed it would be embarrassing for them to do so, since they tend to regard the subject as being one of great practical importance in the conduct of the nation's affairs. (1981: 14)

I should like, also, to say how grateful I am that the Centre for Independent Studies has given me the opportunity of playing the role of what must, to its Executive Director, seem to be that of Devil's Advocate. Possibly such an ungodly hour as this demands some representation from that quarter! Alternatively, he may have known that when I wrote in a Melbourne church newspaper that libertarianism was not a Christian option several readers subsequently wrote to say that they had found my arguments so compelling that they had become libertarians. But even to suggest such reasons, is, I believe, uncharitable. The CIS claims to stand in the great liberal tradition and accordingly has graciously provided a platform for one of its opponents. As I claim also to stand in that tradition, I commend it.

As would be expected, there is much in Brennan's paper with which I agree. Thus I agree that there is no salvation to be found in parties.

No political system, however apparently good, can make an **ultimate** claim on the Christian's loyalty. There is **no** uniquely 'right' system that can be given cosmic sanction in the sense that it is the single manifestation of God's kingdom on earth. (p. 9)

I also agree that

We cannot afford the luxury of assuming men to be angels. We must necessarily concern ourselves with the issue of how to minimise the harm that a man can do to his fellows when internal moral constraints on his behaviour are inoperative. (p. 12)

And it is for that reason that I say, with Brennan, that

When the Christian chooses to enter the political arena – and I do not believe he can conscientiously do otherwise – he ought to do so with some sense of the rules of the game he is to play. If these rules are not the best among the set that seems feasible, he is right to work to change them. (p. 15)

But it is here, also, that I part company with Brennan, for while we may agree on the rules of political debate, it is unlikely in the extreme that we would agree on the rules by which an economy should be run.

At this stage it might be desirable to discuss an aspect of methodology. If an argument is to be put forward 'from the Christian point of view' it is essential that it be based on Christian premisses. In particular, because Christians believe that the Bible is the authoritative word of God it is necessary for the argument to be based on the principles contained therein. It then doesn't matter whether the person putting forward the argument is a 'good' Christian, or indeed whether he is a Christian at all. The test of the validity of the argument is whether or not it is consistent with the Bible, and not whether it is put forward by a Christian, or even whether it is supported by a large number of Christians.

Brennan has, I believe, a totally inadequate understanding of the Biblical concept of justice and it is this which has led him to his mistaken belief in

freedom as the prime characteristic of a tolerable political order (p. 3)

I would argue that it is not 'freedom', but justice, in **the Biblical sense**, that should have ultimate priority. Brennan argues that

Rights are the basic subject matter of **justice**,

and he defines those rights **as the**

(moral) claims that individuals make on one another that are properly to be enforced by the exercise of state power. (p. 5)

Accordingly, he emphasises that

any argument about social justice is an argument about giving individuals what is **rightfully theirs**. (p. 6)

But such a concept of justice falls far short of the Biblical concept. Certainly that encompasses 'rights', but it goes far further, as is illustrated in Psalm 82:2-4:

You must stop judging unjustly; you must no longer be partial to the wicked! Defend the rights of the poor and the orphans; be fair to the needy and the helpless. Rescue them from the power of evil men.

Thus the rights of the poor and the orphans must be defended, but justice also demands that we be 'fair to the needy and the helpless'. As if to emphasise that justice is positive action, that verse is translated in the King James Version as 'do justice to the afflicted and needy'.

This aspect of justice is based neither on the rights nor on the deserts of the recipient. It is sufficient that there is a **need**, and without labouring the point we can illustrate this both by Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan and, possibly more relevantly, by His discussion of the Final Judgement when He will 'separate the sheep from the goats'.

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Away from me, you that are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.'

Then they will answer him, 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and would not help you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.' (Matthew 25:41-45)

The idea of ultimate judgement runs throughout Scripture and for this reason Brennan's argument that God has chosen to cede away His power would seem to be quite wrong. Certainly I disagree with his emphasis that the history of God's revelation of

Himself to man is as the servant, the one who empties himself, makes Himself of no account. (p. 8)

The Christian tradition has always been that the message of Easter, 'He is risen', is a proclamation of victory and power, and of the belief that Christ will come again as Judge and King to rule in right and justice until the end of time. (Is. 9:7) And thus Christians look upon the apparent 'ceding away' of God's power not as powerlessness but as an indication of His gracious dealing with sinful men. They felt able to pray

Lord, look upon us from heaven where you live in holiness and glory. Where is your great concern for us? Where is your power? Where are your love and compassion? Do not ignore us. (Is. 63:15)

As in reply, Isaiah once more asserts that Judgement is inevitable, but that through God's gracious and powerful intervention there will be a 'new heaven and a new earth'.

In Proverbs we read that

You may think that everything that you do is right, but remember that the Lord judges your motives. Do what is right and fair; that pleases the Lord more than bringing him sacrifices. (Prov. 21:2,3)

'To do what is right and fair' is translated in the King James Version as 'to do justice and judgement' so emphasising that judgement is broader than the simple protection of legally enforceable moral rights, encompassing as it does concepts of 'fairness'. This was also spelled out by Paul when he urged the Corinthians to share with the Macedonians in giving to the poor members of the Jerusalem church:

Since you have plenty at this time, it is only fair that you should help those who are in need. Then, when you are in need and they have plenty, they will help you. In this way both are treated equally. (II. Cor. 8:13,14)

This discussion of the Biblical concept of justice leads me to assert that Scripture does not give any priority whatsoever to the libertarian, and Brennan's, idea of individual freedom. Indeed Brennan hints that this is so when he says

what is required is a life of **grace**, in which one's acts are the outcome of faithfulness to the vision of God's will for His world and are not to be justified by appeal to the merits or deservingness of others. (p. 5)

That grace requires that the Christian recognise that the state has a legitimate claim on some of his income. Hence Paul, writing with respect to the Roman state, with which he had little enough cause to be enamoured, said:

Everyone must obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God. Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered; and anyone who does so will bring judgement on himself. For rulers are not to be feared by those who do good, but by those who do evil. Would you like to be unafraid of the man in authority? Then do what is good, and he will praise you, because he is God's servant working for your own good. But if you do evil, then be afraid of him, because his power to punish is real. He is God's servant and carries out God's punishment on those who do evil. For this reason you must obey the authorities – not just because of God's punishment, but also as a matter of conscience. That is also why you pay taxes, because the authorities are working for God when they fulfil their duties. Pay, then, what you owe them; pay

them your personal and property taxes, and show respect and honour for them all. (Rom. 13:1-7)

These verses clearly indicate that the state is entrusted to do God's will and that Christians ought to support it in doing so by paying their taxes. Brennan has argued, I believe correctly, that the Church in exercising its prophetic role must stand aside from state power (p. 8) but he goes far too far when he suggests that for Christians 'the use of [political] power to achieve desirable ends is at best only presumptively desirable' (p. 8). Paul certainly did not support that position, but argued that the political authorities are 'working for God when they fulfil their duties'. That does, of course provide a loophole – the authorities may not be working for God, in which case, in what I believe are Calvin's words, they 'are as worthless as an old pair of shoes and should be discarded'. But it cannot seriously be suggested that redistribution towards the poor is **not** working for God – such an activity is certainly in accord with Scriptural injunction.

Having dealt with what I believe to be the central flaw in Brennan's argument, I should like briefly to turn to two or three other points.

Brennan argues that

collective compassion can only be permitted up to a point that is consistent with the consent of the donors. Beyond that point, we are in the business of using political power to **coerce** individuals into fulfilling their obligations; and at this point . . . the social justice proponents and the moral majoritarians leap into the same camp. (p. 6)

There seem to be two confusions here. The first relates to the 'public goods' nature of much of government expenditure, whether that be defence, the administration of law and order, or on the provision of social welfare. Provided that the decision-makers are subject to democratic control it is tendentious to suggest that they use their powers 'coercively'. Secondly, there is confusion between those acts which involve the actor alone, and those which involve other people. Prayer and Bible reading may, if motivated correctly, lead to the spiritual development of those engaged in them, and they may even have some externalities. (For example, Christian libertarians might, through such spiritual exercises, learn the error of their ways and then use their influence for the improvement of the physical condition

of their fellows.) But even if that be so, the exercises must remain essentially private and personal. In contrast, charitable acts must, by definition, involve people other than the donors. What is more, even if performed ungraciously and with impure motives, charity can still lead to the amelioration of the condition of its recipients.

In discussing the democratic process, Brennan points out that political power does not confer sainthood upon its holders, who accordingly might not redistribute wealth 'in the direction that is morally desirable' (p. 9). That is of course true, although the system under which Australia and other Western democracies operate is probably more responsive to the control of the people than Brennan suggests.

He argues that there can be no assurance that the holders of political power will behave in a way which accurately reflects the opinions of voters. He also provides an example to show that majority rule may permit a majority coalition to exploit a minority (p. 13). Within the terms of his analysis, he may be correct, but I do not believe that it adequately reflects political reality in Australia or other Western democracies. In fact, in Australia the thrust of much recent criticism of the political process has been that parties are far too responsive to public opinion so that none, in government or not, is prepared to take the necessary 'hard' options for fear of electoral rebuff. For this reason many, and not only politicians, have argued that Australian parliamentary terms should be extended from three to four years.

The numerical example given by Brennan may be of some interest to social choice theoreticians for he has relaxed Arrow's 'Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives Condition' to enable him to aggregate the intensity of individual preferences. When applied to social groups, this requires both that each individual's preference intensities for different events can be summed in a consistent way and that the resulting sums, for different individuals, can then be summed. Technically this requires that there be cardinality of utility. That is one route of escape from Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, though I should not have chosen it myself. I would prefer to introduce some sort of vote-trading (or log-rolling) mechanism which would take into account the different preference intensities which different individuals have for the same policy. It is, in fact, through log-rolling, carried on by continuously changing internal coalitions, that political parties establish their platforms and it is through the somewhat similar process of lobbying that coalitions

of 'interest groups' are able to persuade parties, and governments, to change their policies. Incidentally, it is because they do not provide the facility for vote trading that single issue parties have, as in the recent Tasmanian elections, done so disastrously at the polls. Vote-trading violates the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives Condition, but it nevertheless is one of the important ways through which our majoritarian political decision-making process is able, over time, more or less to reflect the electorate's opinions.

Brennan suggests that

it is by no means obvious that the net effect of government action is to redistribute towards the poor (p. 14)

and says that Julian le Grand has concluded that in the U.K. the major public welfare programmes have been 'somewhat regressive'. There is a problem of aggregation here. It is not logically inconsistent to argue that while many poor individuals have been assisted by redistributive measures, so too have many wealthy. If the wealthy have been the main beneficiaries of redistributive measures aimed at benefiting the poor that is not an argument against that aim, but for seeking to ensure that future redistributive measures are better designed than they have been in the past.

While I am not convinced that the measures which have been employed to date have been as unsuccessful as Brennan might suggest, I am sure that they have not been entirely satisfactory. But I am certainly not as pessimistic as he is about the feasibility of a government administered redistributive process, nor do I believe that to be effective the power to redistribute would need to be exempted from electoral constraint. Indeed to believe so would be contrary to my view of justice. The task is, I admit, difficult but a large measure of effective assistance has already been given by government to the poor of our society. Better and more efficient policies are, of course, needed. I would urge Geoffrey Brennan as a Christian and an economist to assist in their design.

## References

- Mishan, E.J. (1981) *Introduction to Normative Economics*, New York, Oxford University Press.  
Biblical references are from *The Bible in Today's English Version* (United Bible Societies).

# Response

Geoffrey Brennan

It might seem more than a little self-serving for me to compliment Dr Williams on his insightful and clever comments, since he seems to be so supportive of my general position. But I confess that I rather relish that support and that I found his remarks very much to the point and very enjoyable in the telling.

But if agreement is gratifying, disagreement is more interesting – and for that reason, I wish to focus my reply on Bill Stent's comments, which show, I think, both plenty of disagreement and a certain amount of misinterpretation. Let me say, at the outset, that I am happy to acknowledge the possibility that I may have '... a totally inadequate understanding of the Biblical concept of justice'; but I suspect that I, much more than he, would be inclined to doubt that the Biblical position on many issues (including the meaning of justice) is so unequivocal, uniform and clearcut that it admits of a single, unique interpretation. And frankly, I find the appeal to the poetry of the Psalms – and a few meagre verses at that – as an attempt to show precisely and decisively what 'justice' entails to be less than totally adequate.

As I read Stent's comments, I have the feeling that he either flatly rejects any distinction between obligations and rights, or that he does not understand the possibility of any such distinction. For he has not so much directly addressed my reasoning in this connection as he has driven right past it.

Because I may have expressed the distinction poorly, let me re-express it in a different way. That one has obligations under the moral law seems entirely clear. That one will ultimately be judged in the light of those obligations also seems clear, though the precise role of 'faith' and 'works' in the final judgement and the nature of the connection between the two is one of those

examples of biblical ambiguity that I have already referred to. But that final judgement is not, I take it, supposed to be any sort of model for temporal judgement: courts of law in Australia are not, I assume, in Stent's vision to be charged with the responsibility of determining the 'faith' of particular individuals and punishing or rewarding them accordingly, and should not be so charged even in the best of all possible worlds.

Given this, one has to distinguish very carefully between those obligations that will be relevant on the 'last dreadful day' and those that ought to be enforced here and now in courts of law. To fail to make this distinction is, in my view, both theologically unsound and morally outrageous: it is the path to the *auto-da-fe* and Il Grande Inquisitor. In this connection, let me take up Jesus' account of the final judgement in Matthew 25. Will it, I wonder, be any response to Christ's charge to visit prisoners, or feed the hungry, to respond: 'Well, no Lord, I didn't. But I did pay my taxes, and I did vote for prison reform and food stamps'? Will it be adequate to respond: 'Well, no. But I made those other guys do it'? Yet is it not the case that making other people do what one believes one ought to do oneself is **precisely** what is at stake in non-voluntary collective action of the 'good-doing' type?

These questions do not seem to trouble Bill Stent. The use of force to compel others to do 'good' according to his vision (or his version of the Biblical account) does not worry him, apparently. The only reason Stent provides as to why we might refrain from using force in the bible-reading, prayer-saying cases is that it may not be effective. I regret that I cannot share his sang-froid. I simply do not believe that it is in any way congruent with the Biblical view of personhood to make others mere instruments in one's own moral projects. And the appeal to the morality of the outcome, though relevant, is not **sufficient** grounds to justify the violation of the others' integrity. Of course, to say this, begs many questions. If I am to be involved in taking from A to give to C then is it A's integrity that will be violated if the taking occurs, or C's that will be violated if it does not? This question cannot be answered without some notion of who has a 'right' to what – an issue which is different from that of A's **obligations** with respect to the use of that which he has a right to.

To put the point yet another way, Stent and I bang heads directly when he states '... it cannot seriously be suggested that redistribution towards the poor is **not** working for God.' It seems to me entirely clear that there are cases where such redistribution is simply wrong. Dr Williams' delicious caricature of

the liberation theologian's version of the Good Samaritan parable is entirely apropos here. A case in which a poorer man **steals** from a richer is not a contradiction in terms: if A has an obligation to give to C, it does not follow that C is behaving properly if he uses force to take from A.

All this seems so obvious to me, and so fundamental to the Christian understanding that I am baffled at Stent's obstinate refusal simply to ignore the logical possibility. I am equally baffled at the appeal to Romans 13. I cannot see how the citizen's obligation to obey the law (which I acknowledge) bears at all on the issue of what the lawmakers ought to do. Are we to conclude that political decision-makers can do anything they wish, because they **will** do God's will, come what may? The issue is **not** whether I should pay my taxes. It is the issue of how big the taxes ought to be and how, more generally, political power ought to be used.

And as to the issue of **God's** power and the demonstration of that power as the central theme of the New Testament, I think that Bill has misunderstood my claim. I do not deny the reality of the divine power, or the triumph of the Easter event. Or the claims expressed in the Ascension. Or the ultimate judgement. But the emphasis on the Messiah as the suffering servant, the one who 'to be first, would be last', who humbles Himself even to death on the cross – all this is not **my** emphasis (as he claims). It is an absolutely central part of the New Testament's account of God's dealing with His people – and it seems to me to require singular insensitivity to the biblical record to deny the importance of this theme.

Theological questions aside, let me attempt to clear up some purely analytic 'confusions' of which Stent accuses me. In the first place, Arrow's 'impossibility theorem' is **not** at issue in the example in my paper. That theorem states that it is not possible to devise a social welfare function with certain properties: I do not deal with social welfare functions at all, and it seems to me that Stent's reference to Arrow is entirely beside the point. In the second place, log-rolling does nothing to save majoritarian outcomes from the possibility of cycling, or from generalised inefficiencies. The simple point that my example was designed to illustrate is that the expectation that one will be a member of the decisive coalition under majority rule is independent of income level. Redistribution via public policy is therefore as likely to go from poor to rich as from rich to poor. Under observed political arrangements much goes on in both directions. And a very great deal of it is, almost certainly, coercive (i.e., without the consent

of those who lose). It is, as I see it, hopelessly naive (and, one might add, dangerously ignorant of much of the relevant public choice literature) simply to assume that, because there exist 'public goods' in the Samuelsonian sense, governments will seek to provide only goods which fit that category and that they will provide them in anything like optimal amounts. If Stent's claim is that most political redistribution is in fact in accord with the wishes of 'donors', I should certainly like to know his evidence. All the questionnaire data that I am familiar with indicates a strong desire for **reduced** welfare spending by all except recipient groups. This is not decisive evidence but it is **something**.

Let me finally make a response to Stent's ultimate urgings. There are, of course, great attractions to the design of 'better and more efficient policies'. In some ways, nothing could be nicer than to wheel the world to my own vision of how it ought to spin. And I have, I think, good reasons for wanting it to spin one way rather than another. But I am aware that the **blind** may lead the blind; and I vaguely recall something of moles and beams. To harness the engine of government for the creation of the brave new world is a dangerous enterprise, even when one's motives are pure. And I am by no means sure, even about my own. It is for this reason that I am reluctant to force people to do things either for their own good, or for the good of others, or for the good of society as a whole (whatever that may mean). So I am inclined to refuse Bill Stent's kind offer on the policy front – and suggest an alternative possibility. That we, each of us, do what we can to be faithful to our obligations to **all** persons – that we fulfil our obligations to the poor, as best we can, but not at the expense of the integrity and autonomy of others.