**Introduction**

The year 2022 marked the eightieth anniversary of the publication of William Temple’s (1881-1944) *Christianity and the Social Order*, as a set of proposals for the reconstruction of Britain after the war; it was seen by some as “blueprint for the welfare state.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Following a conference in March 2022 at Canterbury Cathedral organized by the William Temple Foundation to mark this anniversary, another conference was held at Blackburn Cathedral in December 2022, which forms the background for the articles in this issue. The reader will be reminded from some of the articles here that William Temple was a public figure who had been prominent in both church and national politics. Given that his father was also Archbishop of Canterbury and headmaster of a major public school, Temple the son, was at the heart of the establishment. As such, Temple saw the Anglican identity at the centre of the social order and its reform.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, two of the articles of this issue will focus on his legacy in the establishment of the Council of Christians and Jews at a time when the Jews faced the horrors of the Second World War. Temple, therefore, also led the way in pursuing the common good in a context that was showing signs of religious pluralism and differences.

The Blackburn commemoration reminded us that Temple, as bishop of Manchester, presided over the establishment of the diocese of Blackburn as a separate diocese from Manchester. Given that the reality of Blackburn today is rather different from the reality that Temple would have known (As Tim Winter’s response reminds us here) with the population demographic changing to include a greater number, not of Jews, but of Muslims; and given Temple’s ability to grasp the changes of the complex world in which he lived and his commitment to enabling dialogue with others with the aim of developing a more humane social order (as Rowan Williams’ response points out), that legacy will have significant lessons for us today, especially in light of the Corona virus pandemic and how various religious communities responded to it.

The sceptic might question why should we bother at all? The Church of England may have a long and honorable record of involvement in the wider life of the nation and its communities, but isn’t the church’s role no longer unique in pursuing the welfare of the community at a time when the national census suggests that less than 50% of the population consider themselves Christian?[[3]](#footnote-3) Others might point out that the Church’s involvement was not always benign; its privileges in the British establishment may not do a great deal of justice to non-Christians or other religious communities. Neither of these claims are satisfactory for the arguments in this issue.

The connection with the pandemic was central to the December conference and remains important for us here to unpack a bit more the relationship to William Temple and the role played by religious communities. On 1 April 2020, the philosopher John Gray wrote in *The* *New Statesman* that the health crisis triggered by the pandemic was a “turning point in history,” as it has exposed pitfalls in our economic and political lives.[[4]](#footnote-4) Gray suggested that “Liberal Capitalism is bust.” Therefore, the fall of what he calls “hyper-globalisation” is clear; the future is also clear as far as he can predict: “when the economy restarts, it will be in a world where governments act to curb the global market.”[[5]](#footnote-5) But the economically liberal eye in the world does not seem to want to see the effect of this crisis. The liberal, he reminded us, aims at raising material living standards instead of fostering community cohesion and asking questions about social and political legitimacy. Given that the crisis has triggered questions about both livelihoods as well as lives, Gray notes that talking about the economy means discussing livelihoods. Being concerned about lives necessitates aiming for some kind of economic growth as well. On the other hand, indefinite growth will have to be curbed for its detrimental effects on the environment and the lessons arising from this crisis regarding the long-term protection of societies. If the protection of citizens overrides economic growth, he concludes, both democratic and authoritarian states, will have to “meet this Hobbesian test” or else, “will fail.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Gray continues to outline his thought about the effects of the crisis on world geo-politics as well. Yet, what this interesting, passionate analysis does not do is present a value judgment on what would be considered “healthy” action in the circumstances. Rational philosophical argument alone about the state of the world does not address what Gray’s important reading sees. In another argument that appeared at the same time, that was no less passionate, James Noyes and Adrian Pabst shared Gray’s diagnosis of the limitations of our liberal economic and political models but insist that the “resilience against the pandemics of the future” lies with “strengthening the civil bonds”;[[7]](#footnote-7) for, “the relations that make us human also nurture our resilience,” they added.

What the pandemic has revealed, therefore, is that our human mind and our human will cannot be independent of the material world in such a way that mind and will can dictate their needs upon the world in which we live. We are part of a web of relationships. Now what are the relations that make us human? Like John Gray, Noyes and Pabst explain that it cannot be the political and economic model, where “profit is privatised, debt is nationalised, and risk is socialized.” Unlike Gray, they point to practical actions concerned with the health and wellbeing of civic society. They also point out that the UK government “had already provided a blueprint for this…in its Civil Society Strategy of 2018,” which they are concerned might be sidestepped.

We do have to reconsider, it seems, habits of traditional social cohesion, around our various communities, our families, and our understanding of ourselves as part of these larger social units. Such actions are based on habits that are not dependent on individual reasoning by means of a reductive cost-effective analysis that might interest those worried about the economic reality alone. These discussions are important as we contemplate the future in light of the present. Gray’s article lays bare the alarming philosophical foundations of our current reductive habits. Noyes and Pabsts’s article adds the urgent need for a different kind of foundation that helps us organize our world. In their words, we need to rediscover the meaning of “the human and natural substance of society.”[[8]](#footnote-8) If we are to find any realism in this renewal, we need more than an abstract understanding of individual reason or will, as the neutral definition of modernity tends to understand such terms.

To that end, the articles in this issue attempt to explore aspects relating to what it means to establish a strong civic society today in the light of Temple’s theological legacy and its effect on the social order. Theology seems to be an important foundation for the discussion and several trends appear to be coming together, in the Church and in the academy today, which suggests a desire to see a theological foundation for the Church’s social engagement and how that fits with the wider religious communities in Britain today. However, one needs to clarify if traditional habits of cohesion presume the need for a religiously informed policy; can religious faith inform these debates? John Gray who has sharply diagnosed current ailments is a type of mystical atheist who proposes that “a godless world is as mysterious as one suffused with divinity, and the difference between the two may be less than you think.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Noyes and Pabst, by contrast, do not hide their Christian allegiance. The contributors in this issue with their varied religious affiliation suggest that the question surrounding the current crises of British society is a question of justice, both for the human and the non-human world. They diagnose the pressing problems facing the contemporary political system and propose the need for actual choices British society must make; as such, for all our authors, the question is how to think of our human future as compatible with the character of God.

Can one turn this into concrete policies? This is a tricky business for two reasons. First, various people might think that their religious tradition offers the best possible scenario for weathering any crisis. But such an assumption could reduce “religion” to a “functionalist theory,” giving religion no more than a psychological or sociological definition.[[10]](#footnote-10) In other words, it defines religion in secular terms. Once you have explained the “theory” and its function, then you would have explained God’s will too. Why not choose something else? Second, it is true that Christians, like Muslims and others, have behaved in their history as if they are the owners of a system which they alone are capable of managing. Human beings have always been good at using God to support their ideologies, especially at times of crisis. Such ideologies are often exclusive in their interest – whether liberal, conservative, or nationalist.

William Temple saw the dangers of this reductionist approach to religious interventions in one of his later works titled *Citizen and Churchman*. If the Church is seen, he noted, not as “true Fellowship” but as an “Association,” it becomes “self-defensive” as any other association and therefore anxious about its ideas.[[11]](#footnote-11) When religious intervention becomes caught up solely with a crude understanding of identity, any religious tradition ends up trying to defend itself against being “corrupted”; but the irony is that it manages to corrupt itself by being protectionist in the first place. At the same time, “the detachment to which the Church is called…is not a hermit-like withdrawal from the world; on the contrary it is the way by which the Church may most influence the world.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For him, the worship of the Church is the foundation of that influence and not simply a private matter. He clearly points out that in the Eucharist:

We bring familiar forms of economic wealth, which is always the product of man’s labor exercised upon God’s gifts, and offer them as symbols of our earthly life. . . . Because we have offered our “earthly” goods to God, He gives them back to us as heavenly goods, binding us into union with Christ in that self-offering which is His royalty. . . .The Eucharist divorced from life loses reality; life devoid of worship loses direction and power. It is the worshipping life that can transform the world.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The worship of the Church for Temple was, therefore, of social and political value. Despite the changes in the political and religious environment of Britain today, Temple’s vision remains important for thinking about the way in which and the purpose for which religious public engagement takes shape. This is not least because of the emerging of various new interests and continuous work of trusts and institutions, such as the William Temple Foundation among others. The renewal of this interest of the Church found a strong expression during the Archbishopric of the more recent successor of William Temple, Rowan Williams. Williams’s public engagement and his response to this special issue is important to our understanding of the evolvement of this Temple tradition, which does not take what some might call a “sectarian” self-defensive emphasis. As such, this issue may help towards a clearer articulation of that tradition. Indeed, the time is ripe for a renewed approach to public theology and the considerable benefit for the whole society of serious religious engagement and cooperation.

Therefore, we have chosen to engage with interreligious concerns in this context with a deliberate intention of echoing Temple’s legacy as part of that revival, and with that legacy in mind, knowing that pursuing the common good is about pursuing the good of all communities here. The good of Christians depends on the good of their Muslim and Jewish neighbors and vice versa. Some might note that the expression of the Temple tradition in this issue does emphasize the more “liberal” aspects of his thought, especially with its celebration and acknowledgment of religious pluralism; also, a great deal of interest in these articles focuses on how to influence policy using empirical research. It is a tradition the William Temple Foundation kept proudly for decades in its understanding of Temple’s legacy, exemplified most specifically by the work of Professor John Atherton and now Professor Chris Baker.

Tim Winter notes in his response here how Temple had almost “a Rahner-like” acknowledgment of non-Christians. But this is not to be entirely equated with liberal economics. David Shaw’s and Chris Baker’s articles explore how Temple’s understanding of the Welfare State is not entirely equal to a centralized state – let alone privatized profit or socialized risk. Chris Baker’s research reflects on his own involvement with the parliamentary Faith and Society group. Matthew Barber-Rowell reflects on his practical engagement with grass roots communities in the Northwest, not simply discussing abstract theories but also active engagement fed by a particular theological vision. They remind us of Temple’s “middle axioms” that shape a rational consensus without delving into religious particularities and looking at the state to supersede human individualist tendencies.

The corona virus pandemic was a reminder also that often such enquiries have been prompted by crises of different types. The market economy has often brought with it cycles of recession and prosperity. We know that in the aftermath of the pandemic and the current economic downturn, those with the least resources tend to experience serious hardships if not near destitution. We read of how religious communities led the way with impressive actions of mutual support during the corona virus pandemic; indeed, various communities suspended any differences of opinion. Ekaterina Braginskaia brings a study from outside the Blackburn context. Her article is another fine example of highly organized and business-like Jewish and Muslim cooperation in providing support for refugees in this instance.

But this special issue is not simply celebrating this charitable tradition or that. We know that faith traditions do not exist simply to alleviate poverty alone and to lead foodbanks. Many others do that too. We know that we do what we do, often for different reasons, coming out of our diverse religious convictions, and born out of what could be varied or even competing visions for society. We cannot and we should not avoid these conversations. Indeed, when we discuss “suspension of differences” at times of crisis, we are not clear whether these are temporary or more long lasting. As such, interreligious argument is not necessarily a bad thing for society. It ensures that religious communities do not simply stand to be challenged by secular power (itself in need of being challenged regularly) but are rather more concerned with truth as they receive it. Living in conversation about the different views of truth is good for the health of the whole society, if society is not to be defined simply by naked power, including naked religious power.

This leads to our third and last point, which has to do with the broad topic of political theology and more specifically political virtue and political ethics; even if we know where power lies, we need to know what we want that power to do and the reason for its action in the first place. In this discussion, we can develop a proper definition of, and space for, dialogue, communal goals, as well as the place of social cooperation with and challenge to political authority. Anglican polity, which William Temple represented, as we have noted above, is fully discerned in the liturgy of the Church, rooted in the Book of Common Prayer, and its grounding in scripture, as well as with what the Prayer Book called “the Catholic Creeds” and the Church Fathers of the East.[[14]](#footnote-14) As such, there is a mystical dimension to how the church is constituted by its participation in the inner life of God as triune love, awakening creation to participate in divine life, making human nature divine, and immortalizing nature.[[15]](#footnote-15) While the English Reformation produced something similar to what Tim Winter called here “caesaropapism,” the state was still limited in what it could demand of citizens who have relationships and loyalties beyond the state. Rowan Williams pointed out that:

even in the period when Anglicans were most absolute about the divine rights of monarchs, there was a clear recognition (exposed notably even by Archbishop Laud preaching to the Court of Charles I) that this could not mean that the state was preserved from falling into error or tyranny, or that the state had an unqualified right over consciences.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Therefore, we have the expression of a distinctive Anglican polity and social engagement being discerned; referencing the German prince bishop of Mainz, Carl Theodor von Dalberg in 1793, (great uncle of Lord Acton) Rowan Williams speaks of the:

interpenetration of two sorts of political action…on the one hand the routine business of a law-governed society, on the other the relations and obligations that exists in virtue of something other than pragmatic or self-interested human decisions, the solidarities that do not depend on human organization.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Thus, if the state exists so that citizens labor together for the common welfare, as Temple seems to have believed, the complex relationship between the secular authority of the state and the role of religious engagement that concerned Temple too, brought to a particular focus a discussion among the contributors here about Habermas’s “post-secular society.”

Historically, in England, the Church’s real presence and engagement was focused on the local. The church polity dispersed authority in regions and localities. Some have argued that the political and mystical dimensions of Anglican polity have similar resonances with certain Islamic understandings of the body politic.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, Tim Winter pointed to important convergences between the Islamic tradition, especially that of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, with some of Temple’s Anglican sensitivities, convergences of common concern for practical understanding and good judgment on all levels of society, aiming at the common good; but the differentiation it seems between civil and religious authorities in Islam and in England had different emphases, simply because Islam did not develop a distinctive body called “the Church.” Kenneth Dyson noted that the emergence of the modern state was not the result of a simple platonic dualistic distinction between church and state but was the result of “a complex flux of disintegration of old political units…emerging in various ways from diverse local conditions.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, the relationship between religious authority and political authority in Islamic lands in the classical period did not evolve in the same way as it has in the European context.

This comparison has not been fully explored in the current scholarship and there is not much space for this kind of comparison in this special issue. Indeed, there might be scepticism among some about the value of such discussions for real change in society and local communities. But if we are asking what sort of society we want to have and to be, then learning something of the history and of received wisdom and practice is part of how we do that.

The main interest in this gathering of articles, as it is for the continuous work of the William Temple Foundation, is not simply about the political success or the economic development of any specific community *per se*. In fostering Temple’s fellowship and what Chris Baker calls “empathy” here, we learn something of the type of character traits that are important for good civic engagement and the proper “welfare” of society, not simply functional bureaucracy or one group brokering the powers of success over other groups. In engaging with one another courteously, but openly and truthfully, we relearn what true sociality is about in the local context shaped by the political and religious history of Britain. It is about learning how the theological vision of “Welfare” and the common good is integrated into the social and political.

The real challenge, therefore, from the reengagement with William Temple’s tradition here is spelling out the issues in Britain that need to generate the sort of realistic debates that are of concern to communities. How can this virtue of the “local” as it evolved in the English Church, inspire a different type of national political engagement. How do we discover an agenda from the local level that puts pressure on government from below to produce morally robust practical engagement with the common good? These are the real sort of practical questions appearing in the articles here, which will require further work and publicity going forward.

1. Hughes, John, ‘After Temple?: The Recent Renewal of Anglican Social Thought’, in Brown, Malcolm, et al., *Anglican Social Theology* (London: Church House Publishing, 2014), pp. 75, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See David Shaw’s article and Chris Baker’s article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> (accessed, September 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As the philosopher John Gray pointed out in 2020; see, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/04/why-crisis-turning-point-history> (last accessed on 16 May 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2020/03/only-lasting-antidote-pandemics-stronger-civic-society> (last accessed on 17 May 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gray, John, *Seven Types of Atheism*. Allen Lane, Milton Keynes, 2018, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of An Illusion*, translated by W.D. Robson-Scott (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), pp. 28-33; Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), pp. 36-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Temple, William, *Citizen and Churchman* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), pp. 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p.100. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Temple, William, *Citizen and Churchman* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), pp. 101-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rowell, Geoffrey, ‘The Confessions of Faith of the Early Church as seen in the Classical Anglican Tradition’, in *Anglican and Episcopal History*, September 1991, vol. 60. No. 3, pp. 305-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Chris Baker’s article and Rowan Williams’ response on the theological foundation of this participation, underpinning the meaning of ‘Fellowship’. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Williams, Rowan, *Faith in the Public Square*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, p. 31. This expression of this polity goes back to reformation history in England and has resonances in some European context, see the recent publication of Cromartie, Alan, *The Constitutionalist Revolution: An Essay on the History of England*, 1450-1642 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Izetbegovic, Alija Ali, *Islam Between East and West* (Illinois: American Trust Publications, 2012), p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dyson, Kenneth, *The State Tradition in Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution* (Oxford& New York: Oxford University Press) p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)