

## **The Unexamined Society: Public Reasoning, social justice and the common good**

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The current revival of interest in the common good is exciting, and not just because it has the potential to change the way we do politics. It also provokes us to reflect upon the sort of society we have and the kind of society we would like.

We are not in the habit of reflecting in this way. There have been moments when we have endorsed new political platforms at the ballot box, but we do not routinely engage in reflection upon the purpose of our corporate life together and the values and principles upon which that life is built.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in this we fall foul, collectively, of the judgment Socrates made about individuals who leave their lives ‘unexamined’.

The process leading to the referendum on devolution in Scotland in 2014, however, demonstrated that, when people do have the opportunity to decide the kind of country they wish to live in, they have both the inclination and capacity to engage in robust and informed debate. Participation in that referendum was, at 85%, higher than for any UK election in living memory,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that, when profound political change, beyond an agenda set by mainstream political parties, is at stake, people have an appetite for democratic engagement in its fullest sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the last example of a ‘national conversation’ about how our polity operates, and in whose interests, was the so-called Putney Debates in 1647.

<sup>2</sup> [www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/16/uk-election-turnouts-historic](http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/16/uk-election-turnouts-historic) [accessed 28 September 2014].

Embracing the common good also impels us to move beyond the party political agenda to consider the kind of society we wish to live in. Placing both human dignity and human community at the centre of political and economic decision-making, the common good challenges us to consider the extent to which we live in solidarity with each other, recognize our interdependence, and seek the wellbeing of all.

More positively, it dares us to come together to find ways in which we can forge a fairer and more equal society, one in which all can enjoy fulfilment in the economic, political and cultural life of that society. As Catholic Social Teaching, one of its main wellsprings, asserts, ‘the common good is the reason that the political authority exists’.<sup>3</sup> Thus it pushes us to think beyond our traditional understanding of democracy, with its emphasis on periodic elections involving parties promoting sectional interests, towards the question of what ‘politics’ is for and how it can fulfil its *raison d’être*, the welfare of the people for whom it has been created. It also takes us beyond a ‘right/left’ polarisation of politics, seeing neither greater power for the state, nor greater freedom for the market, as necessarily the key to improving human wellbeing: factors such as a renewing and reinvigorating of civil society will also be involved. Pursuing the common good is about recovering hope, vision and purpose, or, in Christian terms, discovering how all can know the ‘life in all its fullness’ which Jesus placed at the heart of his mission (John 10.10).

### **Public reasoning**

Both Amartya Sen<sup>4</sup> and Michael Sandel<sup>5</sup> have argued that public reasoning, more than elections, defines what democracy is about. South African theologian John de Gruchy sees democracy both ‘as

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<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), #168, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2010) 321-37.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice: What’s the right thing to do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), chapter 10.

a *vision* of what society should become and... as a *system* of government that seeks to enable the realization of that vision within particular contexts.’<sup>6</sup> We need to encourage and embrace the public reasoning and envisioning of which these writers speak if we wish to forge an alternative to our current politics, in which sections of society, divided by competing interests, press their disparate concerns on a state which has no core of shared values to draw upon in order to adjudicate on these disputes.<sup>7</sup> But how, concretely, might we develop a public conversation about the ‘good life’ in a society characterised by ideological, religious and moral plurality?

On the one hand it will be argued that, in a pluralist society, no one particular set of beliefs should be allowed to prevail over others, nor should the state be seen to endorse one conception of the good society over others. Yet the very point about the common good is that it is *not* imposed from outside (or above) but emerges from open, inclusive discussion committed to exploring competing convictions regarding in what it might consist. It serves precisely, as Michael Sandel says, to generate ‘a more robust public engagement with our moral disagreements’.<sup>8</sup> To seek the common good is to take pluralism and social difference *more* seriously than does conventional politics, since, as Anna Rowlands asserts, it involves addressing these challenges by promoting a more deliberative and participatory politics.<sup>9</sup> No society will ever agree conclusively regarding in what ‘the good life’ fully consists but, as Alain de Botton has argued, this ‘should not in itself be enough to disqualify us from investigating and promoting the theoretical notion of such a life.’<sup>10</sup>

## Social justice

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Richard Harries, *Faith in Politics? Rediscovering the Christian Roots of our Political Values* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 64 (emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Vallely, ‘Towards a New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching in a Pluralist Society’ in Vallely, ed, *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century* (London: SCM, 1998) 154.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice*, 268. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #170, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Rowlands, ‘Faith in the Common Good’, unpublished briefing paper, 9 June 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012) 83.

I want to pursue a way forward suggested by Raymond Plant in his essay, *Politics, Theology and History*. Recognizing the potential pitfalls in promoting discussion specifically about ‘the common good’, Plant proposes a focus on ‘social justice’, a search for those ‘common needs or basic goods which people have to have in order to... pursue any conception of the good whatever it might be.’<sup>11</sup>

Such an approach, Plant suggests, addresses the question of how a shared vision of society – such as is implied by the common good – might be pursued in a pluralist society. Plant is clear that

to argue that the common good can consist in a rich, deep and elaborated form of substantive agreement on values and human purposes... looks both implausible and potentially dangerous in a society marked by moral diversity in which individuals believe strongly that judgments about substantive and, indeed, ultimate values are for them to make by exercising their own judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Promoting debate on ‘social justice’, however, renders the task of pursuing the common good less a search for some kind of ‘substantive common purpose’ or ‘transcendent moral order’ than an attempt to identify

the range of goods and services, benefits and opportunities which all citizens need to have in order to pursue their conception of the good, whatever it might turn out to be.<sup>13</sup>

There will still be groundwork to do, given liberalism’s antipathy to the merits of social justice. For Friedrich Hayek and the neo-liberal economic school, it is fundamentally not the responsibility of the state to tinker with the outcomes of a market system in which everyone is freely allowed the opportunity to buy and sell. If some people find themselves without the essentials of life, that is simply a consequence of the various transactions that take place within the market and cannot be

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198.

<sup>12</sup> Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*, 196-7.

<sup>13</sup> Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*, 198.

considered unjust unless such transactions are coerced. Thus, for neo-liberals, the appropriate response is charity, not state redistribution, and the purpose of a welfare state to prevent destitution, not rectify inequality. Hayek famously dismissed social justice as a ‘mirage’.<sup>14</sup>

At the other end of the liberal spectrum will be those for whom responsibility for the administration of social justice must lie with the state. But while the state could have a role in the quest to satisfy basic needs, over-reliance on it can serve to weaken, de-skill and disempower communities as well as generate dependency. ‘Redistribution without reciprocity’, as Maurice Glasman has written, can ‘leave its recipients untransformed’: ‘the state can undermine responsibility, agency and participation.’<sup>15</sup>

The idea that even a minimal shared understanding of ‘social justice’ may be attainable is also rejected by the philosophically liberal view, articulated most cogently by John Rawls.<sup>16</sup> For Rawls, it is essential that governments in liberal democratic societies do not espouse one normative concept of ‘the good’, only that they provide adequate procedures to enable each member to choose from a range of ‘goods’ and debate their relative value. A government promoting one particular notion of ‘the good life’ risks imposing on everyone values espoused only by some. It fails to respect people’s ability and right to choose their ends for themselves.

Yet as we have already noted, by definition the common good is not something ‘imposed’ from above: rather it emerges from open, mature discussion. In any case, as Sandel argues, an individual’s deliberation about their own ‘good’ cannot but involve reflection on the good of the community to which he or she is bound. It is mistaken to think that one can remain neutral regarding the values

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<sup>14</sup> F. A. Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976). See also Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*, 203.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Glasman, ‘The Good Society and the Politics of the Common Good’, lecture given at the Centre for Social Justice, 11 February 2014, <http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Events/Glasman-speech.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2014].

<sup>16</sup> See for example, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971) and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

upon which a society is grounded, or the ends to which it should be directed: ‘it may not be possible, or even desirable, to deliberate about justice without deliberating about the good life.’<sup>17</sup>

For Sandel, achieving a just society involves more than securing individual ‘freedom of choice’: we have also ‘to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise.’<sup>18</sup> John Finnis also wants to go beyond Rawls in arguing that the pursuit of the common good and justice requires more than the establishment of certain procedural rules which ensure individual liberty or fair play. For Finnis the community needs to operate together to

secure the whole ensemble of material and other conditions, including forms of collaboration, that tend to favour, facilitate and foster the realization by each individual of his or her personal development.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of this I want to suggest that it is possible to conceive of a debate about the merit and meaning of social justice, addressing the question:

*do we, as a society, agree that we have a responsibility toward those among us who lack the means to pursue their conception of the good life, and commit ourselves, with the practical support of government, to work to ensure that that lack is remedied; or do we consider that, both in principle and practice, pursuing social justice is wrong and that, so long as individuals are free to pursue their own lifestyle and subjective preferences, government has no responsibility other than to ensure that that freedom is maintained?*

Such a debate would not only deepen our political discourse, moving us from a focus on individual material wellbeing toward what best serves the ‘common weal’, it would provoke critical thinking

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<sup>17</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 242.

<sup>18</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 261.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Nicholas Sagovsky, *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice* (London: SPCK, 2008) 173.

about the operation of the market and the question whether it should work to promote the wellbeing of all. I want to consider each in turn.

## Politics

Pat Logan has highlighted the potential of the common good to change the nature of political discourse within democratic societies. ‘A notion of the common good’, Logan writes,

gives us a language which can take us beyond the notion of politics as simple *bargaining*, where one group’s rights and interests are played off against another’s, to mature political *argument*, where communication and a common search for good can be pursued.<sup>20</sup>

Michael Sandel also wants a renewing of political discourse towards ‘a politics of moral engagement’,<sup>21</sup> noting that in order for this to happen there needs to be a re-orientation among citizens, away from a focus on purely individual concerns toward the importance of building a common life together. ‘If a just society requires a strong sense of community’, Sandel writes,

it must find a way to cultivate in citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good. It can’t be indifferent to the attitudes and dispositions, the ‘habits of the heart’, that citizens bring to public life. It must find a way to lean against purely privatized notions of the good life, and cultivate civic virtue.<sup>22</sup>

Oliver O’Donovan is also worried that what inspires people to political action is less a concern about wider social issues than the defence of their private or sectional interests;<sup>23</sup> and if, like Sandel, he does not explicitly use the language of ‘conversion’ when considering how a shift to concern for the common interest might be achieved, Clifford Longley does refer to the involvement of the conscience

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<sup>20</sup> Pat Logan, *A World Transformed; When hopes collapse and faiths collide* (London: CTBI, 2007), 125.

<sup>21</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 269.

<sup>22</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 263-4.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 271; cf. Valley, *Towards a New Politics*, 151.

in embracing the common good and the need for a ‘moment of *metanoia* when the truth really strikes home that “we are all responsible for all”’.<sup>24</sup>

What this *metanoia* involves, as the papal encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* implies, is a shift, when confronting social issues, from harbouring feelings of pity or a concern to make a practical response, to a recognition of our ‘solidarity’ and ‘interdependence’ one with another. The response to social problems should not be ‘a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress’ at others’ misfortunes, rather

a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.<sup>25</sup>

As the US activist and writer Jim Wallis likes to put it, the change we need is that which moves us beyond wanting to keep up with the Joneses to making sure the Joneses are okay!<sup>26</sup> I shall return to how this change might be encouraged later.

## **The Economy**

A debate on the common good will provoke reflection about the operation of the market and the role of government, challenging those who hold polarised positions with respect to both to think in new paradigms. It will prompt us to move beyond wanting to see excessive power invested in either the market or the state, recognising that both should work together to promote the wellbeing of all. While the market will need maximum freedom if it is to enable, in the words of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, ‘people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and

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<sup>24</sup> Clifford Longley, ‘Government and the common good’ in Nick Spencer & Jonathan Chaplin, eds, *God and Government* (London: SPCK, 2009), 163.

<sup>25</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1987) #38.4

<sup>26</sup> Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street* (New York: Howard Books, 2010) fly-leaf.

more easily',<sup>27</sup> common good considerations bring us back to the question of social justice by asking whether it is meaningful to talk about people having the 'freedom' to pursue their conception of 'the good' if they lack the basic necessities to be able to do it.

Engaging with the common good, then, prompts questions about the very purpose and end of market activity. As the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales noted in their document on the common good issued prior to the 1997 general election, 'market forces, when properly regulated in the name of the common good, can be an efficient mechanism for matching resources to needs in a developed society'. No other system is superior in terms of encouraging wealth creation, advancing prosperity and enabling poverty to be relieved. But when the economy itself becomes the end rather than the means, when the distinction between the market as a 'technical economic method' and 'a total ideology or world view' is blurred, individual rather than common interest may prevail. As the bishops put it,

an economic creed that insists the greater good of society is best served by each individual pursuing his or her own self-interest is likely to find itself encouraging individual selfishness, for the sake of the economy... A wealthy society, if it is a greedy society, is not a good society.<sup>28</sup>

Other commentators on the common good reflect the bishops' concerns regarding the potential of free market economic theory to claim more for itself than is warranted: for Nick Townsend,

business activity should never be subjected to an *overriding* imperative of maximizing profit. Rather, it can and should be a hard-headed form of love of neighbour, in which the *end* is to supply goods and services – things that are good for and of service to people – and the wholly necessary *means* is making a profit.

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<sup>27</sup> *Gaudium et spes* (1965), #26.

<sup>28</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, (London: 1996) #78-80, 19.

‘In neoliberal capitalism’, Townsend concludes, ‘ends and means have been mistaken for each other.’<sup>29</sup> John Gray also notes how market freedoms should only be a means to an end, that end being individual well-being.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, for Clifford Longley it is on account of its identifying a distinction between the market as a tool and as an ideology ‘that Catholic Social Teaching has an important contribution to make to current thinking on how to make contemporary capitalism a gentler beast.’<sup>31</sup>

Here we return to the suggestion that ‘social justice’ serve as a starting point for a conversation about the common good. If the minimum demand of a social justice agenda is that all citizens have the basic goods, services and opportunities they need in order to pursue their conception of the good, this challenges us explicitly to confront the question of the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ of market activity. Is our concept of ‘justice’ one which demands that no one should be excluded from having a stake in society, including those who are most marginalized, regardless of how they came to be in that situation? And does that lead us to want to argue that the market should be open to that degree of manipulation necessary in order for it to meet that end? Or do we consider the goal of the market simply to be its freedom to operate in a wholly unfettered manner, viewing its outcomes not as matters of justice or injustice but the necessary consequences of a morally neutral process?

At present we take it to be the duty of government to create and sustain the conditions under which we, as citizens, are free to produce and consume as we wish. Our notion of the ‘good society’, albeit that it may be implicit, is one in which maximum individual freedom is guaranteed and government, taking note of the demands we citizens express, enables those demands to be satisfied with minimal interference. Recovering the common good brings into view another vision of society, one in which

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Townsend, ‘Government and social infrastructure’ in Spencer & Chaplin, eds, *God and Government*, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Valley, ‘Towards a new Politics’, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Clifford Longley, ‘Structures of Sin and the Free Market: John Paul II on Capitalism’, in Valley, ed, *The New Politics*, 107.

we also take into account those shared moral obligations which make up the bonds of community and which government must also protect.

To the liberal economist, the unfettered operation of the market is precisely the way to satisfy the demands of the common good, to enable each person to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily. Yet we still have the issue of those who, for whatever reason, do not or cannot reach their fulfilment. Can we meaningfully talk about people being ‘free’ to pursue their conception of the ‘good life’ if they lack the basic necessities needed in order to be able to do it. As Plant has argued,

If the state is seen as a guarantor of freedom for individuals, then it would be part of the responsibility of the state to secure to individuals the resources and opportunities they need to be *able* to do what they are *free* to do.<sup>32</sup>

Among these might be health, education and a degree of financial security.

For Michael Sandel the growing gap between rich and poor is a further theme which ‘a new politics of the common good’ should address, undermining as it does the ‘solidarity that democratic citizenship requires’.<sup>33</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have identified the adverse social outcomes found in societies characterised by a high degree of inequality,<sup>34</sup> and Sandel also notes what he calls the ‘fiscal’ and ‘civic’ social effects of deepening inequality: ‘fiscal’ in the sense that, as the rich live ever more separate lives and withdraw from public places and services, so they become unwilling to support them through their taxes, and their quality deteriorates; and ‘civic’ in the sense that what were once public spaces cease to be places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another. ‘The hollowing out of the public realm’, Sandel concludes, ‘makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic community

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<sup>32</sup> Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 263, 266.

<sup>34</sup> See in particular Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better* (London: Penguin, 2009), and the website of the Equality Trust: [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk).

depends.’<sup>35</sup> A common good approach would seek to engage all sections of society in debating this issue, exploring questions such as the extent to which narrowing the inequality gap would be in the interest of all, and whether public institutions and services might be rebuilt so that rich and poor alike would want to take advantage of them.

## **Government**

Economic reforms of this kind raise the question of the role of government in promoting the common good. Clearly government would play a part in any drive to reduce inequality, but common good teaching challenges more broadly the notion that (in Catholic Social Teaching terminology), ‘the right ordering of economic life’ can ‘be left to a free competition of forces.’<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Catholic teaching argues that, while all members of society have a role, according to their capacity, in attaining and developing the common good, ‘the State’ has the *responsibility* for attaining it ‘since the common good is the reason that the political authority exists.’<sup>37</sup>

Catholic teaching thus poses a challenge to the current orthodoxy that, left to its own operations, the market can meet the needs and wants of individuals and society. In a document issued following the demise of Communism in 1989, John Paul II warned against embracing a free-market capitalism ‘not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality’. For the Pope, neither unrestricted capitalism nor ‘the socialist system’ was compatible with a ‘society of free work, of enterprise and of participation’; for while such a society would not be ‘directed against the market’, it would demand

that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Sandel, *Justice*, 266-7.

<sup>36</sup> *Quadragesimo Anno*, Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI (1931) #88.

<sup>37</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #167-8, 94-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Centesimus Annus*, Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1991) #35.

A ‘common good’ perspective on the market prompts a number of questions for us today, including whether policy decisions must always be considered *first* in terms of their economic implications, or whether factors such as the extent to which they are ‘right’ or ‘just’ be given more consideration; might, in other words, seeking the common good lead us at times to agree on a course of action *because it is for the good of all* before agreeing how it will be realized?

A common good orientation would also challenge us to ask whether growth in GDP is necessarily the best indicator of our collective health and wellbeing, or whether that might be dependent upon other factors; to think afresh about our responsibility to those beyond our immediate community, including those not yet born, in the light of what we know about climate change and the imperative to adopt more sustainable lifestyles and business practices; and to reflect upon whether the marketization of services is always the right course, or whether some should still remain ‘services’, paid for from the public purse? Importantly, it would also challenge the fundamental liberal assumption that our motive for engaging in market activity is primarily to acquire personal wealth and comfort, that we do not also have the capacity to be concerned for ‘the other’ and the well-being of wider society.

### **Subsidiarity**

If pursuing the common good requires that governments be open to the possibility of acting, on our behalf, to ensure that the market works for specific ends which we agree are socially desirable, this is not to say that it envisages the return of big government: as noted earlier, it is the responsibility of *all* members of society to promote and work for the common good, not simply politicians and government officials. The common good flourishes primarily at the grassroots. Often spoken of in the same breath as the common good is the concept of ‘subsidiarity’, another core feature of Catholic Social Teaching, which specifically rejects the notion that governments arrogate power to themselves: indeed, stressing the importance of community initiative, mutual co-operation and de-

centralization, subsidiarity asks of the state that it only undertake those activities which exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. ‘As much freedom as possible, as much intervention as necessary’ describes the ideal relationship between government and local communities in the search for the common good.<sup>39</sup>

Subsidiarity and the common good should be seen as complementary rather than standing in isolation to one another. Thus for example, while subsidiarity requires schools, hospitals and the police to be administered as low-down the chain of decision-making as possible, it does not require such services to be privatized. As Clifford Longley has put it,

to insist on the withdrawal of ‘the state’ from health, education or welfare provision, as some of the more extreme proponents of subsidiarity advocate, is not a true application of the principle because it could easily undermine, rather than promote, the common good.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The common good challenges us to address the fundamental, and essentially religious, question of what it means to be human. It asks whether we primarily see ourselves as autonomous individuals, whose goal as a society extends only as far as realizing individual potential, individual goals and individual freedom, free from any responsibility to seek a common purpose or care for those unable to realize these individual goals? Or whether we believe that our humanity is constituted most profoundly by our relationships, such that our personal wellbeing includes reference to the fact of our sharing a common life together.

These are questions we need to discuss in order to encounter the central truth to which the common good attests, that we only fully flourish *as individuals* when those around us flourish too. Of course,

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<sup>39</sup> New Zealand Church Leaders, *Social Justice Statement*, 1993, #28: [www.justice.net.nz/justwiki/social-justice-statement-1993](http://www.justice.net.nz/justwiki/social-justice-statement-1993) [accessed 5 March 2013].

<sup>40</sup> Longley, ‘Government and the common good’, 167-8.

the conversation is alive in many quarters, but the challenges involved in developing it are great, which is why the language of ‘conversion’ is appropriate. We noted earlier Sandel’s assertion that creating a just society involves changing ‘the habits of the heart’ and ‘leaning against purely privatized notions of the good life’, albeit that self-interest (in the sense that my individual flourishing depends on the flourishing of all) may inspire action for the common good no less than pure altruism.

Participation in projects seeking to *actualize* the common good is one way in which its benefits can be realized by all. If the common good is rooted in ‘the local’, then it is through experiencing the difference it can make at grassroots that we can begin to embrace it as a mode of politics. From schoolchildren identifying issues of concern in their local neighbourhood and preparing cost-effective and creative solutions for submission to their local authority,<sup>41</sup> to people with divergent perspectives and interests on specific topics coming together to listen, dialogue and generate new and mutually beneficial ideas for action,<sup>42</sup> the common good can prove its value as a new kind of conversation that goes beyond old divisions – left and right, business and unions, secular and faith, local and national – to create new and hopeful possibilities.

An important catalyst for common good activity can be the church, which has nurtured the concept of the common good and is at the centre of many communities promoting civic action and building relationships across divides. The Christian faith can also provide, for some, a ‘foundational narrative’ or ‘reason’ for a society ordered around mutuality rather than individualism, that of human beings made in the image of a Trinitarian God whose very essence is relational and interdependent.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lyn Campbell QSM, ‘Where does social justice start?’ in Ruth Porter, ed, *Pursuing Social Justice in New Zealand* (Auckland: Maxim Institute, 2007) 16.

<sup>42</sup> Such dialogues have been promoted by ‘Together for the Common Good’ – [www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Tim Gibson, ‘Spirituality and the countryside: a rural perspective on Christian formation and the Big Society’ in Alan Smith and Jill Hopkinson, eds, *Faith and the Future of the Countryside: Pastoral and theological perspectives on rural sustainability* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2012) 204-6; Anna

If the Catholic catechism is right that

a society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is  
a society that has the common good – the good of all people and of the whole person – as its  
primary goal<sup>44</sup>

we need urgently to develop a public conversation about how such a society might be achieved.

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Rowlands, keynote lecture at the Together for the Common Good conference, Liverpool, September 2013, <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/viewpoints/opinion-pieces/articles/anna-rowlands.html> [accessed 19 March 2014].

<sup>44</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #165, 93.