Introduction

Thinking the Unthinkable about Welfare

Crisis, Obituary – Or Just Change?

Caution should be in order whenever one is tempted to talk about the 'crisis', 'demise', or 'death' of the welfare state in Britain. Nicholas Timmins, author of a biography of the (British) welfare state, first published in 1995, noted in his introduction that 'almost everyone to whom the idea of the book was mentioned instantly cracked a joke about the need to be quick about it before the thing disappeared'.[1] The welfare state was, it seems, already in a state of terminal crisis in the mid-1990s.

A decade earlier, however, theologian Duncan Forrester began his book on *Christianity and the Future of Welfare* by saying that 'the time of little adjustments here and there is past; today a radical reconsideration leading to far-reaching changes is inevitable ... welfare is in crisis'.[2] Then again, writing of the welfare state of the mid-1970s, Julian Le Grand described how it had just been hit by 'an economic hurricane ... [and] an ideological blizzard'.[3] And a decade earlier, when it was very much in its so-called Golden Age, Harold Wilson and Richard Crossman accused the Conservatives of wanting to 'dismantle' the welfare state after Edward Heath had spoken of 'a new Beveridge' and the Tory's 1966 election manifesto had opened with him saying that he wanted 'to see our social services recognise the overriding claims of those most in need'.[4] Discussion of the demise of the welfare state is much burdened by rhetoric and hyperbole.[5]

Timmins notes, in the context of his introduction, that at a time when welfare state services took two-thirds of government expenditure totalling £262 billion per annum, 'the animal, whatever strains it may be under, can hardly be said to be dead'.[6] Much the same might be said in the twenty-first century. The *Guardian* newspaper published an obituary for the welfare

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state in 2013, in which Aditya Chakraborty proclaimed that 'it expired peacefully on Monday, 7 January, just weeks after marking its 70th birthday ... [following] a change in child benefit from being available to all to a means-tested entitlement'.[7] News of its death has, and continues to be, greatly exaggerated.

If claims of crisis, accusations of dismantling, and whispers of mortality seem premature or hyperbolic, however, there can be little doubt that the contemporary British welfare state has and is undergoing a significant transformation.[8] This is conventionally dated to the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979, although Timmins characterises the previous five years of social policy as a 'period of disillusion' and a number of Thatcher's closest colleagues, such as David Willetts, then her health and social security advisor in the Downing Street policy unit, have pointed out that 'she had no clear programme [and] in the early 1980s, social policy featured relatively little on the No. 10 agenda'.[9] In a similar vein, the course of austerity on which the coalition government embarked in 2010 and the wider idea of the Big Society within which it was positioned, were both defended as a necessary response to unprecedented peacetime levels of debt after the crash of 2008–2009, and indicted as an ideologically driven attempt to scale down the state and 'complete Thatcher's unfinished revolution'.[10]

However we date and defend, or denounce, the trends, the changes in the welfare state over the past forty-five years have been significant. They have been part of a much wider reshaping of the state.[11] Public spending has remained relatively constant over this period, fluctuating between 35 and 40 per cent of national income, currently pushing the upper limit of that range. Borrowing has also increased, with public debt, at the time of writing, standing at or near its highest level in more than sixty years. Consistency of size, however, has not been matched by consistency of shape, with function and spending changing enormously.

The British state builds very few houses and spends somewhat less on defence than it once did, although that long-term trend came to an abrupt halt in early 2025 with the promise to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), or back to its level near the end of the Cold War. In their place is 'the big story ... of the ever-expanding welfare state'. Working age benefits have doubled their share of national spending from the pre-Thatcher period to today. Although this area of the benefits system was originally designed to help people who were out of work, today only a fraction of this spending goes to those who are officially unemployed, the majority being spent on households in which at least one

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person is in work. Beveridge's assumption that the money earned from work would be enough to lift a family out of poverty is no longer safe to make, a subject to which we shall return.[12]

The increase in health spending – absolutely and proportionately – has been even greater, with total UK healthcare expenditure around £300 billion, approximately two-thirds of which goes on NHS England's annual budget. The National Health Service (NHS) employs about 1.4 million people, making it the seventh biggest employer in the world. According to the Office for National Statistics, 'healthcare, as reported under the UK Health Accounts definitions, represented 43.1% of government spending on goods and services in 2024, an increase from 31.6% in 1997'.[13] Again, it wasn't supposed to be like this. Beveridge had once forecast that health spending would stabilise or even fall once a nationalised health service had done its job of making us all healthier. The direction of travel could not be more different and appears to be accelerating. As of the mid-2020s, health spending is about 40 per cent higher than it was in 2010, even after a decade of austerity, from which the NHS was heavily protected. As Paul Johnson, former director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, has wryly noted, Voltaire's famous gibe – that although 'some states have an army, the Prussian Army has a state' – increasingly applies *mutatis mutandis* to twenty-first-century Britain, which looks evermore like an NHS with a welfare state attached to it.

Pensions have also increased their share, in the process helping transform pensioners from the poorest section of society forty-five years ago into one of the richest today.[14] Incapacity and disability benefits have also grown, although far less precipitously than health and pensions. 'The share of working-age adults reporting a disability, and the fraction of working-age adults in receipt of disability benefits, have both been rising steadily over the last three decades.'[15] In contrast with all this, defence spending has shrunk (but is, as noted, about to increase once more), borrowing has risen, and the education budget has remained roughly the same.[16]

The reasons behind these trends are widely debated, in particular the extent to which the transformation that gathered pace from the later 1970s and was turbocharged from 2010 was due to exogenous (demographic and economic) factors or endogenous (ideological and political) ones.[17] Declining economic performance, first in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973 and then of the banking crisis of 2008–2009, left governments facing severe pressures on public spending. These were exacerbated in the intervening decades by globalisation, with increasingly mobile capital, deregulated trade, radically different employment regimes, and fierce global

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competition to attract investment, all threatening the ability of developed economies to sustain extensive state welfare provision.[18]

At the same time, Western states have been staring at the prospect of a demographic rebalancing that promises only to intensify this pressure. According to a Chatham House research paper on visions for reform for European welfare states, an increased proportion of people over sixty-five in those countries with extensive state-based welfare provision has placed considerable stress on current levels of pensions, housing provision, and medical and social care.[19]

Demographic challenges have been compounded by the growing heterogeneity of Western societies, through migration and ensuing pluralism and multiculturalism, and the impact this has had on public solidarity and inclination towards redistributivist policies, sometimes known as 'the Progressive's Dilemma'.[20] The extent to which this dilemma is borne out by British public opinion is contestable, but either way it adds a further complexity to welfare politics.[21]

Over and above these exogenous factors, there has also been sustained ideological challenge to the welfare state since at least the mid-1970s. Various critics have condemned it for its alleged centralising tendencies, its economic inefficiency, its demoralising effects particularly on the poor, its fostering of a culture of dependency, its incursion on personal liberty, and its suffocation of civil society.[22] Although these criticisms originated on the neoliberal[23] and conservative[24] right, they were, in some form, adopted across the political spectrum.[25]

Because of the centrality of the welfare state to the twentieth century – the history of the (Western) state in the twentieth century has been aptly described as the shift from the warfare state to the welfare state[26] – this questioning and revision of the size, nature, and objectives of the welfare state has significant implications for the nature of the state itself. The clarion call to 'roll back the state' to its core or essential functions, whatever they are, or to 'fix government' is widely heard. John Micklethewait and Adrian Wooldridge began their book *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State* by saying that 'the main political challenge of the next decade will be fixing government . . . [a challenge] driven partly by the necessity of diminishing resources, partly by the logic of renewed competition among nation-states, and partly by the opportunity to do things better'.[27]

Theirs are not lone voices. The British free market think tank, the Institute for Economic Affairs, has argued that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's regular spending reviews should be seen as 'an opportunity

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to rethink the state'.[28] From a somewhat different political position, the economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* points out, among many other things, that 'the very rapid expansion of the role of government in the three decades after World War 2 was greatly facilitated and accelerated by exceptionally rapid economic growth, at least in continental Europe'.[29] The decline of such growth from the mid-1970s onwards (and the recognition that *Les Trente Glorieuses* that preceded that date were, in fact, anomalous rather than 'the new normal') and its near complete absence in the fifteen years since the crash of 2008–2009, has posed questions pertaining not only to inequality, Piketty's focus, but in the future of the 'social state'.[30] In Piketty's words, 'society has to choose among different types of needs, and there is no obvious reason to think that nearly all needs should be paid for through taxation'.[31] It is into this debate over the nature, shape, size, and purpose of the welfare state of which this book speaks.

What Is 'the Welfare State'?

In speaking into this debate, it is important to answer – or at least to ask – two questions: What actually is the welfare state and why should Christian theology have anything meaningful to contribute to debates about its future which are, one would imagine, highly technocratic? Neither of these questions is straightforward or admits an easy answer, but closer inspection of both leads to ideas that are more closely linked than one might think.

To define the welfare state is to risk prejudging the thing under investigation. In their chapter on its intellectual roots in *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, Chris Pierson and Matthieu Leimgruber note that the phrase 'welfare state' is a 'late-breaking and multivalent term' and that it 'occupies a crowded conceptual terrain'.[32] At a broad level, it is relatively straightforward and uncontroversial. As Pierson and Leimgruber acknowledge, 'there is some agreement over the inclusion of core social services and insurance programmes'.[33] Broadly speaking, the welfare state is a system whereby 'the State provides services, grants, allowances, pensions, etc., to protect the health and well-being of citizens, esp. those in need'.[34] Such a definition, however – and in particular words such as 'provides' and 'well-being' and phrases like 'those in need' – invites a host of further questions, pertaining to its origins, scope, structure, not to mention its grounds and objectives.[35]

In the light of this, it is important to recognise at the outset that there is no single, perfectly delineated or objective entity that is *the* Welfare State,

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however much an insular tradition might incline British citizens to speak of one.[36] Not only do individual welfare states change significantly over time[37] but there are different types of welfare states in existence at any one time.

In 1990, the Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen published an influential study entitled *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, which argued against the convention that 'the level of social expenditure adequately reflects a state's commitment to welfare'.[38] Esping-Andersen's thesis was that the *kind* of welfare system counted as much as its *size*. Other important principles are involved. Does the system favour universal or targeted programs, and if targeted, on what criteria? Does it favour taxation or insurance as the preferred funding model, and if insurance, what combination of private, work, and/or state insurance? What range, duration, and generosity of welfare entitlements does it afford? And what mix of state, market, voluntary sector, and family provision does it favour? All of these factors shape the kind of welfare system, or 'regime', under examination.

Esping-Andersen went on to propose (and test) the idea that welfare states cluster into groups or typologies.[39] He used two dimensions to determine these regimes, 'decommodification' – the extent to which welfare is a matter of right that thereby enables recipients to be independent from the market – and 'stratification' – the extent to which the welfare system builds and cements social solidarities, such as by 'ordering social relations' and 'consolidating class divisions among wage-earners'.[40] On the basis of these dimensions, he identified three welfare regimes, which have since proved the basis of much welfare state analysis.

The first is the 'liberal' regime.[41] This emerged from, and bears the hallmarks of, pre-existing traditions of poor relief (to which we will return in Chapter 1). Within this system, social rights exist but they are predicated on a demonstrable need. Benefits are limited to 'a clientele of low-income, usually working class, state dependents'.[42] The system strongly favours means testing. It tends to be parsimonious. Benefits are modest, entitlement rules are strict, and receipts of benefit often associated with stigma. The overall redistributive impact is negligible. It is individualistic in spirit, and comparatively uncritical of the market, the operation of which it protects and encourages by guaranteeing only a minimum level of assistance or by providing welfare by means of subsidising private welfare schemes, rather than by direct state intervention.[43] Overall, by Esping-Andersen's criteria, it affords a low level of decommodification – people have only very limited independence from the market – and a high level of

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stratification, with 'on the one hand, a minority of low-income state dependants and, on the other hand, a majority of people able to afford private social insurance plans'.[44]

The second regime is the 'conservative' or 'state-corporatist' one.[45] This emerges not (so much) from poor relief programmes but from more state-directed programmes, often instituted by Conservative political leaders and parties.[46] As a result, such welfare regimes are commonly ordered towards fostering loyalty to the state, which enforces and organises a system of social insurance (provoking the hostility of friendly societies that are undermined in the process). Unlike the liberal regime, the 'conservative' one institutes social rights that are based on contribution (and therefore employment). Citizens receive benefits according to the extent to which they have earned them, rather than on the basis of need. They are therefore marked by a strong sense of entitlement, and a much weaker (or non-existent) sense of stigma.

The conservative regime tends to eschew the liberal regime's concern with market efficiency and this, combined with the state organisation of insurance, means that private insurance plays a minimal role. A further key characteristic of the conservative regime is its comparatively strong commitment to the family as a vehicle of welfare. The state encourages traditional family structures (which, historically, meant discouraging the participation of married women in the workplace) and asserts its duty to intervene only when the family's capacity to serve its members is exhausted. Overall, by Esping-Andersen's measures, this regime affords a moderate level of decommodification (though rather more than the liberal regime) but retains a relatively high level of stratification.

The third regime is the 'social democratic' one.[47] If the underlying principle of the liberal regime is need, and of the conservative regime is contribution, that of the social democratic regime is citizenship. The regime is predicated on the conviction that the state has a duty to provide basic equal benefit to all of its citizens, irrespective of their prior earnings, contributions, or needs. It is universalistic and (intended to be) a highly solidaristic system, undermining the stratification inherent in the other two regimes. It 'constructs an essentially universal solidarity in favour of the welfare state. All benefit, all are dependent, and all will presumably feel obliged to pay'.[48] Welfare is universal but also often generous and free from stigma.

In contrast to the conservative regime, the social democratic one pays far less attention to the role of family. 'The principle is not to wait until the family's capacity to aid is exhausted, but to pre-emptively socialise the costs

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of familyhood.'[49] The system is highly redistributive, and expensive, financed by means of universal and often high rate of central taxation. This makes it vulnerable, 'at once committed to a full employment guarantee and entirely dependent on it'.[50] By Esping-Andersen's measures, there is a high level of decommodification in this regime and a low level of stratification, the system, actively promoting equality of status among its citizens.

By using these criteria to identify the classifications, Esping-Andersen was able to identify which countries 'fit' in which regimes, underlining the point that there is no one archetypal welfare state. By his calculations, in the early 1990s, Australia, Canada, United States, New Zealand, Ireland, and the UK all qualify as liberal regimes, informed, at least in theory, by the doctrine of need. Italy, Japan, France, Germany, Finland, and Switzerland qualify as conservative regimes, in which merit, contribution, and family coherence play a crucial role. And Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, and in particular Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are social democratic regimes, informed and shaped by the idea of welfare rights inherent in citizenship.

Neither Esping-Andersen's conclusions nor the logic of his classifications have gone unchallenged. Two criticisms in particular merit mention. The first is that his are ideal types, and no welfare regime is an ideal type. Some are more typologically pure than others. America, for example, is considered to be close to the 'ideal' liberal regime, according to most evaluations, Germany to the conservative regime, and Sweden (historically at least) to the 'ideal' social democratic one. However, even these countries, and certainly others, are in effect mixed systems. Welfare states are the product of political practice and not political theory, and so bear the marks of decades of democratic complexity and compromise.[51]

Second, critics have claimed that Esping-Andersen's two criteria – decommodification and stratification – are inadequate and that a more robust typology would take into account other factors, such as the rules of access (eligibility rules), the conditions under which benefits are granted, the regulations to finance social protection, and the organisational–managerial arrangements to administer the various social security schemes.

The literature on this debate is vast and beyond our focus here. What is relevant is that, however accurate Esping-Andersen's categorisation is and however penetrating criticisms of it are, the very process of asking what the welfare state *is*, naturally and necessarily opens up a range of attendant issues. To think deeply about the welfare state demands more than simply asking how much money we should spend on certain benefits, or even what our spending priorities should be. Rather, it requires that we wrestle

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with questions of moral and political philosophy, and with our understanding and prioritisation of concepts such as need, want, merit, rights, solidarity, equality, and so on. And this offers a bridge to our second question: Why Christian theology?

Why Christian Theology?

At a superficial level, at least in as far as we are focusing on the British welfare state, there is one very good reason why Christian theology should be interested, and of interest. Put simply, it was there at the birth.

For many British Christians, in particular British Anglicans, Christian engagement with the question of the welfare state is invariably associated with the wartime Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. The association was born early. Writing in the *Daily Herald* shortly after the 1945 election, journalist Hannan Swaffer claimed, somewhat improbably, that the Labour Party owed its victory more to Temple than to anyone else.[52] The association has persisted. John Kent concluded his book on *William Temple: Church, State and Society in Britain 1880–1950* with the claim that 'a final assessment of Temple's significance depends on what one thinks of the British welfare state'.[53] 'Analogies drawn from theology' played a 'significant part' in shaping modern political thought, wrote David Nicholls, in his study of the images of God and the state in the nineteenth and twentieth century. 'The benevolence and welfare functions of a divine ruler became a model semi-consciously adopted for a paternal state' by Britons in the middle years of the twentieth century, and 'in no single Christian figure [did] these factors come together more closely and powerfully than in William Temple'.[54]

This is an association made not only by Anglicans or those sympathetic to the idea of state welfare. Assessing Temple's political legacy twenty years after he died, John Carmichael and Harold Goodwin claimed that Temple's impact on the Christian social tradition was 'more of a bane than a blessing', a verdict borne out by their chapter titles: 'Economic evasions', 'Moral confusions', and 'Planning delusions'.[55] More recently, John Milbank has offered a powerful judgement on Temple, or at least the tradition spawned in his name.[56] 'There is a profound question mark over that whole tradition which William Temple exemplified,' Milbank has written, primarily because it stood in the Hegelian tradition 'that tends ultimately to surrender things to the state and risks eroding both the interpersonal and the sense that people are mutually responsible for each other at the immediate social level'.[57] On a still more critical level, William

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Temple was 'a perfect exemplar of the descent of New Jerusalemism from the religious expression of the romantic movement', according to Corelli Barnett in his book *The Audit of War*.[58]

It is easy to see why friend and foe alike have found in Temple's thought, and in the wider Christian social tradition of which he was so representative at such a significant moment, an uncomplicated link to and sympathy for the welfare state. Putting aside the not insignificant fact that Temple was the first English writer to use the phrase 'welfare state', albeit hyphenated, in his 1928 Henry Scott Holland lectures,[59] the circumstantial and conceptual links between Temple and the welfare state are many and clear.[60]

Although he refused William Beveridge's invitation to a 'New Britain' group intended to study and discuss post-war planning – 'as a person I should be quite ready to do it; as an official, I think I must not'[61] – Temple was quite ready to promote 'New Britain', spoke approvingly of the Beveridge plan in a lecture to members of the Bank Officers' Guild,[62] and even wrote to Churchill suggesting that he appoint a Minister for Social Security to 'persuade the country that the whole matter' of post-war social reconstruction 'was being faced' as opposed to 'being tackled only piecemeal'.[63] In February 1943, speaking in the House of Lords debate on the Beveridge report,[64] while steering clear of outright approval, Temple called it 'both epoch-making and epoch-marking', and praised it for its 'universality', its 'national fellowship and unity', its fostering of the 'admirable qualities of thrift and enterprise', and its 'insertion of a foundation of real security compatible with the freedom that is embedded in the superstructure'.[65]

Temple did not, of course, live to see any of this implemented, dying suddenly at the age of sixty-three the year after he spoke on the report in the Lords. However, he came to symbolise the way in which the profound and long-standing Christian engagement in the general issue of welfare, became embedded in the state's responsibility for it. As we shall see in Chapter 1, the Church, through its activities, institutions, leadership, and theology, had been instrumental, albeit in a piecemeal and unsystematic way, of providing the raw materials – ideas, practices, institutions, ethos – for what would become the British post-war welfare state. William Temple simply stands at the heart of this transformation.

However deep this connection is, one might nonetheless argue that it is primarily a matter of history. That was then, this is now. Once the state had successfully taken over welfare responsibilities, the Church – leaders, theology, and all – become irrelevant. Is there, then, a more up-to-date

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answer to the question 'Why Christian theology?' There is, and Chapter 1 is dedicated to spelling it out in some detail. However, as a preamble to those arguments, I would like to highlight two relevant factors here.

First, the manner in which Christian leaders still intervene in welfare issues, and politicians variously welcome or rebuff those interventions, underlines how strong the connection remains. The direction of travel is two ways. Chapter 1 briefly mentions some of the instances in which church leaders have commented, often in strong language, on government welfare reform. 'Beckett condemns Henry' is always newsworthy, even when he's complaining about the criteria for welfare eligibility.

In the other direction, politicians of all stripes commonly call for the participation of churches – carefully bracketed alongside 'other faith groups and voluntary organisations' – in the delivery of welfare. Some are even perceptive enough to recognise that any welfare state needs a wider culture of active voluntarism in order to survive. Such calls are usually ad hoc, often short lived and sometimes politically motivated. Rarely are they made in a concentrated, systematic, or carefully thought-through way. The closest that recent politics has come to this was the Coalition's (actually, the Conservative's) idea of the Big Society in the early years of the 2010 parliament. This endeavour, which is explored in Chapter 5 as an important backdrop to some of Rowan Williams' better known excursions into welfare, was certainly concentrated and arguably thought through, but it was not sustained, evaporating after two or so years, and widely judged to have been unsuccessful.

That failure notwithstanding, governments and oppositions still seek to cooperate (some would say co-opt) the churches for the purposes of welfare, and church leaders and other Christian groups continue to comment, usually critically, on welfare reforms. Nearly eighty years after the welfare state was founded, its connection with Christianity remains strong.

Important as this, there is also a second, arguably more important, connection. If you dig deep enough, you discover the welfare state is about the kinds of things that Christian theology, or parts of it, are also about. Esping-Andersen's work implies that thinking about welfare in a holistic, long-term, and systematic way necessitates going beyond economic and technocratic evaluations to draw on morally and politically normative ones. He highlights how underlying ideas concerning need, want, rights, and citizenship inform the kind of welfare regime a country develops. William Temple touched on other such ideas in his speech to the Lords on the Beveridge report, when he spoke about 'universality… fellowship… thrift… security… freedom'. Research into the different ways in which

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theology and ecclesiology shaped the developments of different European welfare states in the twentieth century, discussed in Chapter 1, draws out the moral status and significance of still other factors, such as work and the family.

What lies at the heart of all of these, as I argue in greater detail in Chapter 1, is the concept of the kind of being humans are. Having anything to say about what humans need, what rights they can claim, what value they should put on work, what responsibilities they may place on family, what kind of freedom they are entitled to, what level of security they can legitimately ask for – all this involves an answer, all too often simply assumed, to the question of what kind of creatures they are.

It is a question that each of the theologians I discuss in this book engages with. Indeed, it is a question the centrality of which they all recognise. Moreover, it is a question that underlies – and sometimes even breaks the surface of – thoroughly secular analyses of welfare policy. William Beveridge, for example, defined 'want' in his wartime report as 'benefit adequate to all normal needs, in duration and amount' but then straightaway acknowledged that 'determination of what is required for reasonable human existence is to some extent a matter of judgement'.[66] That 'matter of judgement' necessarily involves judging human nature. Similarly, and more ostensibly, sociologist of welfare, Alan Deacon, to whom we will return in Chapter 1, has written, 'arguments about welfare are rooted in more fundamental disagreements about the nature of human beings'.

For this reason too, then, Christian theology remains as relevant to discussion of the future of welfare and the welfare state in the twenty-first century as it did when William Temple was enthusiastically, if circumspectly, encouraging the implementation of the Beveridge report in the early 1940s.

Thinking the Unthinkable: Christianity and the Future of Welfare

Returning to where this Introduction began, we should avoid talk of crises and obituaries when talking about the welfare state. This is not because things are rosy in the garden. They are not. Paul Johnson concluded his 2023 book on how much Britain costs by saying that the British 'enter the middle years of the 2020s in worse economic straits than at any time I recall', with all the consequences and constraints that has for public spending and the long-term future of the welfare state. For want of a less clichéd phrase, difficult choices lay ahead.

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But the British welfare state has long faced 'crises'. It has changed, almost beyond recognition, since its founding, is changing fast today, and will need to continue to change as it faces the future. The welfare state always faces difficult choices. And not just the British welfare state. In November 2011, the European Commission launched a high-level group to study the future of welfare states across the continent. The Commission was alert to the threat of what it called 'megatrends' – increasing longevity, lower fertility, an ageing population, shifting family structures, high levels of intra-European Union (EU) mobility and migration, low-quality jobs, in-work poverty, insecure employment practices (the rise of the 'precariat'), economic inequality, digitalisation and virtualisation, and a long-overdue green transition – on social protection schemes. In the light of these factors, which are today combined with shorter-term but potentially no less serious shocks such as Covid-19, the Ukraine war, and energy prices, the Commission charged the group to come up with recommendations 'to modernise and reinforce the welfare state'. The group recognised that 'there are no one-size-fits-all solutions for the diverse European welfare states', and accordingly put forward twenty-one recommendations when it reported in early 2023.

The point of this is less to highlight the specific recommendations, which are available online, than to point out that the group stressed that 'a new concept of social justice, going beyond fair compensation, is called for'. Money would always be an issue, of course, but it wasn't really *the* issue. 'We can safely rely on a good third of future GDP to continue to be allocated to welfare support, largely paid for out of income taxes and social insurance contributions,' the group stated. More substantive was the idea that 'welfare provision should not merely be assessed in terms of its impact on people's material conditions, but even more so in terms of *fostering people's capability to fulfil personal aspirations*', and that 'social citizenship values have gradually shifted [with] fairness … less likely to be seen as being about "here-and-now" compensation, and more about how to pro-actively ensure "*human flourishing*" *and well-being*'.[67]

In other words, the future of the welfare state was tied up with substantive issues of capabilities, aspirations, social citizenship, human flourishing, and well-being, as well as funding and 'compensation'. Such issues, which are informed by deep assumptions about the nature of the kind of being whose welfare is being sought, require a serious and open conversation across society. That Christian thought and practice may be part of that conversation, contributing to the discussion of what kind of welfare regime(s) we should be moulding for the second quarter of the twenty-first century is, in

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principle, no more outlandish than the idea that it should have been part of the same conversation in the second quarter of the twentieth century, when it very much was. The fact that fewer Britons, or Europeans, today are Christians than were then simply means that those who come from this perspective will have to do more work in translating their ideas into publicly accessible reasoning and language. It does not and should not serve as an *a priori* bar to participation.

In April 2024, the British Labour politician Frank Field died. An unconventional left wing MP and latterly peer, he was widely respected across the political spectrum, not only for his courage and integrity but also for his long-standing and determined work in tackling poverty, child poverty especially, and in making the welfare system work to the best advantage of those who needed – and deserved – it most. I alight briefly on his contribution in Chapter 1.

Field was hired by then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998 to 'think the unthinkable' about welfare reform. He duly thought it and was soon out the door. Drawing much of his inspiration from the pre-war Labour tradition of welfare provision, Field argued against an extensive direct state role in welfare provision and, in particular, against means-tested and non-contributory benefits, which he had long considered a source of moral contagion. In their place, he favoured social insurance schemes, more familiar on the continent, and mutual societies, more familiar in pre-war Britain. In effect, in Esping-Anderson's terms, he argued for a shift towards a 'conservative' or 'state-corporatist' regime of welfare. Unthinkable as far as Blair and his chancellor Gordon Brown were concerned, Field's proposals never saw the light of day, and he resigned within a year.

And yet, what was perhaps even more unthinkable about Field's ideas was their deep but exposed theological roots. A practising Anglican with a genuine interest in the political theology of his own tradition, Field once described his proposals as 'about placing a Christian understanding of mankind centre stage'. He rejected the 'sanitised, post-Christian view of human character' of the more modern liberal-left. To assume that altruism was the natural or inevitable form of human motivation was not only naive but to court disaster. Policy needed to recognise the reality of sin and policymakers to 'wrestle with the angel and the serpent in each of us'.

Such theological reflections have no place in welfare reform white papers or European Commission high-level group reports. Nor should they. The strictures of public reasoning are quite proper in such places. But their absence from such documents does not mean they are irrelevant to the overall debate about the future of welfare. Indeed, if discussion of the

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future of welfare is going to delve into the realm of rights, needs, and wants; solidarity, family, and work; capabilities, aspirations, flourishing, and well-being – as indeed it must – such reflections are not only relevant but ultimately unavoidable. To that extent, Christian thought continues to have much to say to the never-ending question about the future of the welfare state.

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