# Public Order and Spiritual Malaise in the 1990s[1]

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In recent years civil disorder has been seen on the streets of not a few United Kingdom towns and cities. In 1991 Cardiff, Oxford, North Shields and Newcastle upon Tyne were rocked by riots. Bristol experienced something similar in 1992. It has become fashionable to attribute these events to social deprivation. In his last report as Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Peter Imbert spoke of the link between crime and inner-city deprivation.[2] Few question that there is a link between the two. But what one makes of that link needs to be scrutinized carefully.

In this paper I endeavour to do two things. First, I shall present cogent reasons for saying that the violent disorder on the streets of our cities (and especially Newcastle upon Tyne) is not caused by social deprivation. Secondly, I shall try to highlight an issue of utmost urgency facing our country and culture today.

## Social deprivation is not the explanation of the Newcastle riots

What are we to make of the events in Newcastle upon Tyne on September 10th–13th 1991? On September 11th, in particular, the media had a field-day. They secured some memorable photographs of the violent disorder that took place in the vicinity of the *Dodds Arms*, a disused and boarded-up public house of ill-repute, on the Elswick Road. The pub was set ablaze and destroyed. Stolen cars were driven at breakneck speed (so-called hotting), purposely crashed and burned out. Some eighty fires were ignited, most against or within unoccupied properties. Hundreds of youths went on the rampage. But most sinister of all, the emergency services attending came under sustained attack.

At least four explanations of these events have been offered.

First, there is the *copy-cat theory*. On the Monday prior to the Newcastle unrest the Meadow Well estate, a few miles away to the east in North Shields, was the scene of an unpleasant outbreak of violence. Prior to that, widespread media coverage was given to similar troubles in Cardiff and Oxford. There are grounds for believing that some wanted to see Newcastle on the map. The west end of this otherwise content and

happy city was not to be outdone. Whilst not denying that this may have been a factor, the copy-cat theory does not provide a satisfactory explanation. It does not take us to the heart of the issue.

Secondly, there is the *conspiracy theory*. Some believe that a hard-core criminal or anarchist element conspired to attack the police and create civil disorder. In support of this view evidence is adduced of rioters being ferried-in by car and minibus. Many came from other parts of Tyneside and even further afield. Mention is also made of the well-established fact that advantage is taken of the frustrations of the disaffected in urban areas that have a history of high long-term unemployment, crime and other social problems. That there was some degree of organization of the riots the police confirm. On Thursday 12th September word went around on leaflets, signposts and by word of mouth that the post office in Scotswood was to be attacked that day. They will also tell you, as a local bobby-on-the-beat testifies, that the rioters enjoyed some sort of perverse pleasure from venting their hatred and anger on the police. This theory does not explain why so many young children—some as young as six—joined in so readily. Again we find ourselves saying that this explanation does not take us to the heart of the issue.

Thirdly there is the *social deprivation theory*. Somewhat predictably both local and national politicians pronounced that the root-cause of the violent disorder was longstanding social deprivation. One problem with this term is that it is not often closely defined. To some it appears to be a convenient catch-all phrase worth bandying about. In one breath the rioting was condemned as 'totally inexcusable'. In the next, somewhat illogically, it was asserted that things will not improve until the high unemployment, poor economic prospects, bad housing and lack of good educational facilities, endemic in the area, are tackled.

At least one national newspaper, *The Independent on Sunday*, asserted in a leader article on September 15th that the 'Politicians have not even begun to address their [the rioters] problems: dismal housing, bad schools, unstable families, poor public transport, unemployment'. Others criticized teachers. No one mentioned that some children are, when they start school at the age of 3 or 4, so emotionally damaged that they are extremely difficult to teach.

What are we to make of the social deprivation theory? It does not square with the facts. Both national and local government, and other agencies, have done and are doing much on all fronts in the west end of Newcastle. Since the late 1950s the whole of the west end of Newcastle has had its housing redeveloped. Most of the estates have been extensively refurbished in recent years. Huge sums of tax-payers' money are currently being channelled into west Newcastle under the government's *Urban Programme* (thirty-five projects in 1991 costing £2.4m); *City Grant* (four schemes costing £1.2m); *Estates Action Programme* (five schemes costing £3.1m in 1990; £2.45m in 1991); and *City Challenge* (£7.5m each year for

seven years as from April 1992), as well as through *The Tyne and Wear Development Corporation* (£12.5m has been used to generate some £140m investment by business on the new Newcastle Business Park). The latter is largely responsible for upgrading the infra-structure and for bringing the prospect of 4500 jobs onto a site that for years lay derelict and vacant. Nursery education provision in Newcastle's west end is second to none within the city and may well be the best in the country. On Monday 14th October 1991 the first piece of ground was dug to mark the beginning of construction of the third new primary school in the area in recent years. And much good work is being done to provide training and skills for the long-term unemployed.

Enough has been said to illustrate that it is both naive and simplistic to say that the root cause of the riots was social deprivation. The people of Elswick are experiencing nothing like that which their forebears faced in the 1930s. Then it was commonplace to see queues to the National Assistance Office hundreds of yards long. These were of men standing five abreast. Children walked the streets barefoot or in very poor quality shoes. And some used to wait at the back door of the Masonic Hall for chicken carcasses from which their mums made soup or stock. There was serious deprivation in the 1930s yet the people did not riot.

The Archbishop of Canterbury was widely reported as supporting the social deprivation theory during a lecture on education to a meeting of Church of England secondary school headteachers on Thursday 19th September—less than one week after the troubles had died down.

It is important for us to know exactly what Dr. Carey said. The main thrust of his lecture concerned the commitment, co-operation and challenge that teachers must show. In his introduction the Archbishop tells us that the reason why the Church of England is involved in education is because the church wants to see 'ordinary young people aspire to a life which is more satisfying—morally, spiritually and physically.' He informs us that Robert Raikes, the founder of the Sunday School movement, was concerned about 'the lawless state of the younger class' of his day. Youths, according to Raikes, were 'allowed to run wild' on the Lord's Day 'free from every restraint'. The Bishop of Chester of 1785 shared this concern and, Dr. Carey says, he 'was no doubt right to recognize the presence of our sinfulness but he no doubt ignored the fact that human wrongdoing is inextricably linked to social deprivation, poverty, poor housing and illiteracy. The media seized on these words; on this 'fact' of which the incumbent of Lambeth Palace reminds us, and announced that the Archbishop had pronounced the cause of the Tyneside riots to be social deprivation.

Clearly there are massive social problems in some towns and cities, Newcastle included. On some estates the unemployment rate is as high as 60%. Poverty exists. Both factors feed or aggravate the frustrations of some. Christians are to show compassion to those in need and as the para-

ble of the Good Samaritan teaches us, they should be in the van of those who are doing all that they can to tackle unemployment, poor housing and illiteracy wherever they exist. However this is not the point at issue. The question is, Is it right to say that 'human wrongdoing is inextricably linked to social deprivation'?

These words are capable of only two interpretations. Either we are informed that human wrongdoing always has social deprivation as a cause, or that social deprivation always leads to human wrongdoing.

The first interpretation is unacceptable because the affluent, well-housed and well-qualified also do wrong. Some steal and do so in a sophisticated way. (We just need to think of the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (B.C.C.I.), the Guinness takeover of Distillers and the fall of Robert Maxwell's empire.) And sexual sins (adultery, homosexual acts, kerb crawling, and even rape) are not unknown amongst the affluent and well educated.

The second interpretation is also unacceptable because some unemployed poor people are law-abiding citizens. It is both erroneous and insulting to suggest that they are more prone to wrong-doing than others. Many people on benefits, who struggle and yet manage to make ends meet, were appalled at the riots that occurred in Newcastle in September 1991. The majority believe that the riots were not due to social deprivation.

Fourthly, there is the *moral deprivation theory*. This explanation asserts that the riots are a symptom of the deep-seated moral malaise that grips our society. This has its roots in two facts.

First, society is made up of individuals who are naturally inclined to do wrong. We are by nature selfish. We want to be independent. We want to go our own way and be individuals in our own eyes. In particular we want to be free of God.

Secondly, we live in a generation that has cut itself off from the old moral code and restraints. Today anything goes. Most do that which is right in their own eyes. Man's inherent selfishness is no longer kept in check. There is no consensus about what is plainly right and what is plainly wrong.

## The urgent issue facing our country today

Recent opinion polls indicate that the man in the street is concerned most about these three issues: unemployment, the National Health Service and education. Those who walk the corridors of Westminster know that two issues persistently demand attention: the economy and Europe. Although all of these issues are important not one of them is as important as the moral and spiritual crisis facing our nation. Moreover it can be argued that none of them will be satisfactorily resolved if we fail to solve this more pressing underlying problem. For, as Scripture says, 'It is righteousness that exalts a nation' (Proverbs 14:34).

It is generally agreed that our country is not in good shape. The crime

figures illustrate this only too well. Consider the following statistics for homicide, rape and robbery in England and Wales, comparing the incidence of reported and recorded cases in 1920 and that in 1988:

| | Homicide | Rape | Robbery |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1920 | 313 | 130 | 235 |
| 1988 | 624 | 2855 | 31437 |

When allowance is made for the increase in population since 1920 these figures show a rise in homicide of 50%, in rape of 1,500% and robbery, of 10,000%. The picture is depressing. It is one of deterioration, especially since 1970.

Secondly, the Northumbria police figures for the offence of taking a car without the owner's consent (TWOC) are 15,078 in 1981 and 27,997 in 1989 (the area covers Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead, North and South Tyneside and Sunderland). This picture, too, is depressing. Within the space of nine years the number of TWOC offences all but doubled. In 1988 this crime was changed from being an indictable offence carrying a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment to being summary only with a maximum penalty of six months.

What do these sets of statistics show? That twentieth century Britain has witnessed an increasing decline in respect for people and their property. Of particular concern is the horrendous rise in offences against women and in car crime. This is primarily a moral problem. It concerns what people do. About how they behave. The violent disorder seen on the streets of our cities is of the same order. Many who riot do so for the 'fun' of it. They are not protesting. Nor do they have demands. They are intent on outwitting and humiliating the police and in doing so cause wanton destruction. What we saw in Newcastle in September 1991 was an outbreak of wickedness; of lawlessness on a large scale.

This situation did not arise overnight. It is the inevitable outworking of wrong thinking, wrong attitudes, and wrong values. During the last one hundred years, at least five schools of thought have had an enormous influence on our society and culture: Evolutionism, Marxism, Freudianism, Feminism and Humanism. Each has played a rôle in the insidious process of undermining the received moral code and understanding of mankind.

The theory of evolution was used by Darwin to answer certain questions in the biological sphere. It was taken up by others and applied in different disciplines with the result that the belief that man is progressing upwards emerged. Although this view is not as popular today it still lingers in the recesses of people's minds.

A direct link can be traced from Marx to the social determinism that many in a number of disciplines have unwittingly imbibed. It is now fashionable, at least in some quarters, to say that man is the victim of his circumstances; the product of his environment. This view, that was popular with the Pelagians in the fifth century, has been popularized in more recent times by progressive thinkers like Rousseau, Darwin, Huxley,

Marx, Mead and even Attenborough. They have undermined the Judaeo-Christian ethic that once held sway in the western world. They have contributed to the marginalization of the Augustinian view that locates sin in the heart of man as opposed to his circumstances and environment.

The teachings of Freud, though now largely superseded and discredited, helped to produce a generation preoccupied with sex and sexual fulfilment. It may be that our Victorian forefathers were somewhat prude but surely outward chastity is far more preferable to the daily diet of sex and violence dished up on television screens, in newspapers and in magazines.

Feminism, when it emphasizes the unqualified equality of the sexes and the right of women to achieve position and status both at work and in society, can lead to a belittling of motherhood. As a result many children are now showered with things but yet deprived of the person(s) responsible for their existence.

And humanism, with its emphasis on man, has helped to debunk God and deify man. Many today see no purpose or meaning to life. This is the inevitable consequence of dismissing the notion of God as our Creator and Judge. Once that has been done all talk of responsibility and accountability goes. This is something that Harold Macmillan saw and voiced at the time of the showdown between Edward Heath and the miners in the early 1970s. When asked what he thought of the situation at that time he replied that all talk of 'the brotherhood of man' makes no sense unless you hold to 'the fatherhood of God'. Despite the fact that opinion polls tell us that some 70% say they believe there is a God, our generation has no, or little, idea of where we have come from or where we are going. Most live in what they (subconsciously) perceive to be a free-wheeling universe. We and the universe are the product of chance. But we and it are going nowhere. But because we insist that someone be at the centre we put ourselves there. Society is turned in on itself. It is human beings, not God, who occupy centre stage. We are witnessing the secularization of society and the relativization of morality. Society is increasingly devoid of absolutes.

These five schools of thought help to explain why our society is what it is today. What many fail to see, and this is most alarming, is that the more we move away from the old moral code the more precarious our society becomes. As Donald Macleod says 'our democracy is living on borrowed time.'[3] That is why the moral and spiritual state of our nation is the most important issue facing our country and culture today.

Our democratic freedoms and values have their roots, not so much in ancient Greece but in the protestant reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At least three great principles were enunciated at that time. Each had a profound influence on our emerging democracy. The principle of *sola scriptura* helped establish the individual's liberty of private judgment. The principle of *sola fide*, with its concomitant stress on the equality of all believers irrespective of their background and social sta-

tus, helped give people both boldness and a sense of self-respect. Whilst the principle of *solus Christus* underlined that because Christ is the only Lord all men are equal before God. The freedoms and values of our modern democracy are the product of giving the Bible to the people.

However if the Bible becomes a closed book then people are deprived of the key to understanding our society and of the tool that God has given to keep in check the excesses to which individuals and groups are inclined. They are also deprived of the key that unlocks the meaning of life.

Some see nothing wrong with this state of affairs. Indeed they welcome it. But the Christian does not. Christians know the truth about mankind. We know that 'out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander' (Mt. 15:19). We know that unless we are born again we shall never enter the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3). And we know that we are constantly in danger of forgetting these truths and of failing to work out the implications of them.

The case can therefore be made that the recent riots in our towns and cities are an inevitable outworking of the spiritual climate in which we live. Their root cause is moral, not social, deprivation. The damage done by rioters can be repaired. Greater resources can be made available to a variety of agencies (police, housing, education, health, training, youth and recreation, and so on). But if this is done at the expense of failing to put right the underlying root cause—the moral and spiritual bankruptcy that is evident on every side—in the long run such efforts will be in vain.

A word of caution must be sounded. There are siren voices out in the market place. John Cornwell says that in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

> Mind-expanding drug usage, the free-love ethic, the quest for alternative lifestyles, preceded a shift towards experienced-based pseudo-religion and intuitive philosophies of life. There was a renewed interest in Eastern religions, spiritualism and guru-centred cults accompanied by a rediscovery of the occult, witchcraft, astrology, 'channelling' and voodoo. . . . By the mid seventies these expressions of religious counter-culture were increasingly associated with the loose alliance of spiritual quests known as New Ageism. New Ageism is a focus for the view that human beings are approaching another stage of evolution by discovering alternative powers within themselves, within the planet and cosmos. New Ageism seeks to heal the perceived social malaise of modern life by promoting a rebirth into a new stage of power, consciousness and control over one's destiny.[4]

What New Ageism promises it cannot deliver. In reality it is a reversion to the Dark Ages; to practices which the Bible outlaws. What we need to see is the re-christianization of our country. History shows that the more christianized a society is then the happier and more prosperous it is. Hard on the heels of fear of, or respect for, God come restraint, respect, a sense of responsibility and tolerance. It is these virtues that our country needs today. Only Christianity can deliver them. Where should we go from here?

First, we must demand of our church leaders, both local and national, that they give the moral and spiritual lead our country needs. This means teaching what the Bible teaches. For too long we have endured churchmen either parading their doubts in public or mouthing in Christian vocabulary the views of economic, political and social theorists. The time has come to present afresh a clear Christian critique and analysis of both the individual and society. The time has come for us to demand of our church leaders that they unashamedly commend the Bible and its teaching to all people or make room for those who will.

Secondly, we must remind politicians, both local and national, that it is their responsibility to restrain wickedness and to maintain law and order. In practical terms this means passing laws which promote family life and moral values. It means reversing the trends of increasing secularism in schools and ensuring that religious education is taught and that it is mainly Christian as the law requires. It also means reverting to the biblical concept of justice. The notion of retribution must be given its rightful place. The punishment must fit the crime, victims must be properly cared for and whenever possible, compensated. Without this there is no justice despite all that is said about deterrence and the reformation and rehabilitation of the criminal.

Finally, as individuals, we must stand against the forces of secularism which pervade education and the controllers of the media. We are living on our Christian cultural capital which is being expended rapidly. Our democracy is living on borrowed time. The situation is urgent. But all is not lost. We must be vigilant. And we must fight hard to restore the Judaeo-Christian ethic upon which our society was built.

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## NOTES

1 The substance of this address was first given on Thursday 10th October 1991 at a lunch-time fringe meeting, organized by The Christian Institute (Campaigns) and chaired by Mr. Gerald Howarth M.P., during the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool.
2 *The Times* 30.7.92.
3 In a lecture organized by the Christian Institute and given in Newcastle upon Tyne on 5.10.91.
4 *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 29.7.91 p. 23.