Letters to the Editors

DARE WE STAY SILENT?

Dear Editors,

A recent incident in Blackpool when Right to Work demonstrators battered a Rolls Royce with a banner saying 'Rich Bastards', is not only understandable but a sign of things to come. No doubt well meaning Christians could use the incident to express concern for the greed and envy in our society, but they would be missing the point.

There is no doubt that over the next few years, as present economic policies take their course, the rich will become richer and the poor will be poorer. It may be the last chance for the churches to convince society that they have a gospel which has eternal meaning and truth for the powerless, disenfranchised and dispossessed, but if their past record is anything to go by, they will fail miserably.

The need for the churches to climb down from the fence on questions of the creation and distribution of wealth is urgent. As a first step the value structures of our society need to be painfully and critically examined.

A recent BBC television news report on Cuba showed just how entrenched and unChristian these values are. We were told in passing, and in a disinterested manner, that in Cuba racialism and unemployment had virtually disappeared. However, and this was the rub, rationing still existed and it was very difficult for the Cuban to dine out.

The ugly sisters racialism and unemployment do exist in Britain. Are we concerned with eradicating them? No. Instead we delight in trivial vapid stories about super scroungers and black settlers coming here to get the dole.

Furthermore, rationing exists in Britain in a big way. For millions of families on low incomes, clothes and especially children's clothes, are already rationed. The heft breaking off a shoe can spell disaster for the pensioner whose commodities are rationed because of a ludicrously low fixed income. Food is becoming an increasingly rationed commodity. Meat, bacon, coffee, sugar, milk and butter are all items which have to be rationed in the family budget. No wonder people carry banners saying 'Rich Bastard'.

But I do not want a society of slogans, where the poor yell 'Rich Bastard' and the rich say 'Lazy Shirkers' in return. What I do want is a society of fellowship, where pride, pomposity and privilege are shed for the true values of sacrifice, compassion and mercy. The present atmosphere of increasing inequality of wealth puts these values to the test and we will all be judged on how we apply them.

But neither do I want a society which is claiming to preserve our way of life, at all costs, when that way of life is underpinned by inate racialism and narrow minded suburban snobishness. We as Christians have to ask whose way of life are we preserving? Is it the way of life for the majority of this nation who live in Bermondsey, Wythenshawe, Gateshead, Liverpool 8, Glyncoorwr, Paisley and the like; those who know what it is like to wait half an hour for the bus in the rain, to wait up half the night for the duty doctor, to receive sub standard facilities in education and health, to have vermin in new housing accommodation, to be described as work shy when desperately looking for work? Or are we preserving a way of life and freedom for the privileged few.

This society wants an answer. They want to know if the gospel we proclaim has any relevance to their growing disillusionment with the political and economic structures which govern them. But such disillusionment is itself a judgement. For too long we, a supposedly Christian society, have asked our politicians what short term benefits they could give us. Instead we should have been demanding from them a vision of society which reflects the justice, mercy and peace of the living God and the sacrificial selfless giving of his Son—a sacrifice we are distinctly reticent about sharing in. The question is will the churches have reacted in time to stop this disillusionment being swept along in a tide of retribution, aggression and violence? Will we have preached the gospel of salvation, of justice and unselfish commitment to one's fellow man? Dare we preach the good news to the poor?

Dare we stay silent? There are others waiting in the wings. Our silence may say to the white man 'join the fascists' and to the black man 'go to hell.'

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CHRIS FORD

D.Z. PHILLIPS AND JAMES RICHMOND

Dear Editors,

I am sure that Professor D.Z. Phillips does not need philosophical amateurs like me to defend him; but a comment from the crossbenches of theology on James Richmond's critique (Theology, Jan. 1980) may not be without interest.

Richmond accuses Phillips, as others have done, of a lack of concern with ontology. This seems to mean 'a lack of concern with whether the object (or objects) of faith actually exists'. But it is not enough to make this accusation without some attempt at engaging with the problems pointed out by Phillips and others in the question 'Does God exist?' Who is asking
whom? Once it has been granted that 'God' is not simply the name of an individual, difficulties about the context of the question, 'Does God exist?' are bound to arise. The logical character of the word 'God' is, of course, an abidingly knotty issue; but Rush Rhees, in a passage quoted by Phillips on p. 173 of his book, sets out with great clarity the confusions that may result from treating 'God' as a straightforward substantive.

Or does 'ontology' mean more than this? Properly speaking, ontology is a matter of discussing what it is to ask about whether something is or is not the case; so that it will be cautious about assuming that a word like 'exists' has the same logical status wherever and whenever it occurs. If Phillips (or Norman Malcolm or Rush Rhees or anyone else associated with this approach) is sensitive to the difficulties of a deceptively simple proposition like 'God exists', as he clearly is, he is very profoundly concerned with ontology (whether or not we like his conclusions): he is examining the oddity of asserting that the existence of God 'is the case'—an oddity noted and discussed in the Christian tradition (and elsewhere, from Plotinus to Shankara) for quite a long time.

Similarly, I am puzzled by the accusation of unconcern with truth and falsehood. An analogy may throw some light here. Paul Halmos, many years ago, described the elements of 'faith' tacitly present in the methods of therapeutic counselling. An example of such faith might be a commitment to the idea of a 'real' or 'true' self, a place of meaning free from fantasy and projection, beneath the veil of conventional human communication. It is a commitment to wariness about immediate impressions, to a readiness to search for a hidden, 'deeper' reality which appears in displaced or coded forms on the surface. Now the question, 'Is there a "real self"?' is again an odd one. A patient or client might ask it in a moment of weariness or disillusion or impatience with the process of therapy. But to put it in that context reveals it as a question about the worthwhileness, even the human 'authenticity', of the process he or she is engaged in. Now any number of facts about the patient's past or present experience may be relevant to the answering of this question, but it cannot be answered, in this context, by any kind of simple demonstration—look! there it is, just as I told you! And we may ask, in what other context does it arise as an interesting or important question? It is a question very close to, 'Is there such a thing as truth?'—which is very strange indeed, but not wholly nonsensical.

The point is that here questions of truth or falsehood are inseparably bound up with questions of 'value'. It would be absurd to say that the worried client is not interested in truth: he or she is asking whether it is after all possible to tell reality from fantasy. It would be equally absurd to expect there to be one recognizable, 'neutral' method of answering the question, as if it were like, 'Is there a mouse in the pantry?' The question of value, or, perhaps better, 'meaning' is not quickly answered.

And that is one reason why Prof. Phillips' approach does not strike me as a cozy, 'invulnerabilist' neo-orthodoxy. There may be rather scant discussion of just how people come to and abandon faith, but this is surely because this is an area where generalization is falsification. One can group together clusters or 'families' of ways in which, as a matter of fact, this has happened and continues to happen; a certain sort of 'apologetic' may still be possible, if people really want it. But it is the search for a single and clear philosophical means of establishing faith (in its fullest sense) that argues the deeper insecurity. The 'unflagging' questions are those of faith itself, rather than of the 'philosophy of religion'. One has only to think of what 'philosophical' theology looks like to see this point.

This is not to say that religious discourse has no rational control or is beyond criticism; nor is it to say that there is no point in raising questions of logical coherence and so on where religious language is concerned. One of the things with which Phillips and others like him (and I hope we may have a moratorium on the term 'Wittgensteinian fideist' to describe them) are clearly concerned is to stop philosophers of religion talking incoherently because they have misunderstood the nature of the language they are studying. I should not describe myself as an uncritical disciple of Professor Phillips; but it does seem to me that he is more concerned than most philosophers of religion to locate the question of faith and un-faith where it belongs—not, indeed, in an irrationalist enclave, but in the context of questions like, 'Is there a real self?', 'Is there a human meaning?' Does it make sense to ask if things make sense? And the securities and vulnerabilities alike of faith are those bound up with the unpredictable and often horrible contingencies of countless particular human stories.

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SYSTEM AND VISION

Dear Editors,

In the unity of thought expressed between the articles on 'Vision', and 'Discovering the ether', (January 1980), I was much taken with the articulation of ideas which I find struggling to the surface in some people here, both expatriate and Malawian. I hasten to add that the numbers involved are small. It is apparent that it predominates in the young. It appears to leave the clergy untouched. Suggest to a young person, on a pastoral visit, that there is an element of doubt and insecurity in all Christian theological statements and you get a response; suggest it to a clergyman of whatever church, and an iron sheet will clang in front of you. Before I came here as a trainer of clergy and laity, I was still unaware of