

CHRISTIANS AND
FASCISM- KEN LEECH Rector of St Matthew Bethnal
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An address given at a Public Meeting Against Fascism at Toynbee Hall,
Commercial Street, E1 on April 14th 1977.

The danger in meetings of this type is twofold: first, that we speak only to the converted and committed, and, secondly, that we do not talk about fascism at all. The first does not matter provided that the result is some clearly thought out strategy. The second is a real danger, and we need to be clear what we are talking about. Fascism is not racism, it is not racial violence, not any authoritarian or repressive regime, not any dictatorship, not increased police power. Emphatically fascism is not a conspiracy or the result of a conspiracy. All these may be elements within the process of "creeping fascism". But fascism is more than all these: it is the inevitable development of capitalist society if it does not move towards socialism. Fascism is not a plot: it is the logical result of certain processes of development. It is a phenomenon of industrial society in severe socio-economic crisis, confronted with the threat of collapse on the one hand, and with the threat of socialism on the other, and containing a very frightened and threatened middle class.

The essential point to grasp is that in the initial stages it is not at all obvious that we are dealing with a movement or a process which is evil, sinister or nasty. It can appear very plausible and highly moral. So early fascism appeals primarily to the middle class and the inhabitants of suburbia. Listen to this appeal:

"The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might, and the republic is in danger. Yes, danger from within and without. We need law and order. Without it our nation cannot survive."

Who is this? Mrs Thatcher? Powell? Rhodes Boyson? The Festival of Light? The Archbishop of Canterbury? Lord Chalfont? No: Adolf Hitler in 1932. It is a popular and plausible appeal, and it has a great attraction to those decent people who are prepared to exchange justice and freedom for a measure of decency and security. It has a particular appeal to those who feel betrayed by mainstream politics, and it is into the vacuum that fascism will quickly step.

The churches and religious people may be particularly vulnerable to the appeal of fascism at two points. First, when religion degenerates into pietism and sentimentality. Lutheran pietism at the time of Hitler's rise was otherworldly, drawing a sharp distinction between the Kingdom of God (otherworldly, spiritual) and the affairs of this world. Secondly, when religion is allied with a dying social order so that it comes to care more about its privileges than its theology. Marx once said of the Church of England that it would forfeit 30 of its 39 Articles rather than one-thirty-ninth of its income. A church which is otherworldly and which has lost a grip on the theology of justice and freedom is an easy prey for fascism. So at Charlottenburg in 1941 German evangelicals sent the notorious telegram to Hitler, assuring him of their "unshakeable loyalty" and hailing him as the saviour of Christian civilisation. Hitler himself said that he had come to complete the work of Luther, and many good decent people believed him.

So the record of the church vis-a-vis fascism is ambivalent. One has on the one hand the long history of compromises and support for repressive regimes - Hitler, Mussolini, Salazar, Franco, the present regimes in Latin America, and on the other the record of witnesses and martyrs, many of them clergy and bishops, in resistance to these regimes. Perhaps one sees two types of Christianity which indicate the really fundamental divide within the Christian world.

I stress very strongly the appeal of fascism to the decent because it is easy to be carried away by the need to oppose and expose the really vicious forms of Nazi ideology which are now being revived. There are Nazi groups operating. The Crusade Church of Tunbridge Wells, for example, will supply you with the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as well as the works of Goebbels and Heinrich Hoffmann's Hitler Was My Friend. The British Movement, whose slogans are around the Bethnal Green area, may be thought to be a patriotic and even Christian group (with its badge of a cross in a circle) but this organisation advertises in its journal Nazi songs, cassettes of William Joyce's "Germany Calling" and the Battle Songs of the Third Reich -£2 each- and Mein Kampf at £3. Very British! But the real danger does not lie here but in the more genteel world of those who would never write "Niggers out" on walls, and among those good people who, when the real evil became apparent, would throw up their hands in horror and admit -too late - "This is not what we meant at all!"

I want to suggest that there are five areas of activity which contribute to the growth of a fascist movement, often unintentionally, and which call for careful analysis and scrutiny. The first is that of religious movements which confuse Christianity with western society and its values. There are many Christians who are willing to exchange justice for decency, and who, because although highly moral, they lack theological depth, can be easily conned by apparently moralistic movements. It is here that the stress on the sexual area can be very dangerous. A stress on "cleaning up the streets" and on anti-permissiveness seems to accompany the beginnings of fascist-type regimes. So the Greek colonels cleaned up the cities and saw naked tourists bathing as a threat to national morality. Genitals were not for public viewing but for police torturing. So in South Africa, that highly moral nation where a husband and wife cannot make love without committing a crime if their colours happen to diverge, the mini-skirt is seen as sinful and sordid. So Hitler cleaned up the permissive Berlin of the 30s and forbade the pure race to be sullied with Jewish blood. How easy it is for some Christians to be led astray by this kind of appeal.

Secondly, there are movements which attempt to identify and attack minorities and lay blame on them in a blanket way. It is not just blacks and Asians but a whole scapegoating process which can be extended to squatters, the Irish, the mentally ill, youth, the unemployed, the poor -anybody, in fact, who forms a threat. In Sir Keith Joseph's notorious "remoralisation" speech in 1974 we saw how this trend could move towards a wholesale attack on social classes 4 and 5. Again, this scapegoating mechanism does not depend on numbers: the Jewish population of Germany was 1 per cent when Hitler decided that zero per cent should be the maximum tolerable level.

Thirdly, and perhaps most dangerous because most financially powerful, there is the activity of those strong vested interests which organise to defend the established structures and to resist threats to their security and power. These may include anti-trades union groups, attacks on the welfare state, and para-military defence organisations of the type supported by General Sir Walter Walker. The National Association for Freedom, Aims for Freedom and Enterprise (formerly Aims of Industry) and similar well-financed groups are obvious examples.

Fourthly, there are the international anti-communist movements, often financed from Korea, Taiwan and the United States.

Finally, there are the grass-roots racialist and "populist" organisations which exploit fears and resentments as well as entirely genuine wrongs at the local level and organise them into racial hatred and intolerance. They are important, but the point I want to stress is that they are not the sum total of the problem. The problem of the respectable suburban appeal of fascism is far far greater.

Finally, four tasks which are urgent in response to creeping fascism. The first is the need for rigorous and continuous analysis of what is happening, for disciplined monitoring of the activities of racist and fascist groups. No response can be effective which is not based on accurate data.

Secondly, a recognition that one cannot fight fascism without building socialism. Some will dissent from this view, but I stand by it. If there is not a movement towards socialism, then fascism of some kind, given the character of our capitalist society, is inevitable. Many years ago, Father John Groser, that devoted East End priest who played a prominent role in the Battle of Cable Street and in the fight against fascism in the 30s, saw this clearly.

"..Fascism..is in a very real sense the natural development of capitalism. Sooner or later in every country capitalism is forced to face the contradictions which prevent its natural development. Confronted by the growing demand of masses of human beings to be treated as persons and not 'hands', it must either allow such radical changes in the structure of society that the ownership of things no longer carries with it inordinate power over persons or declare openly that such ownership properly carries with it such power. If capitalism does the first, it capitulates to socialism. If it does the second, then it asserts that the rights of human beings are derived from their status in society, that their duties are such as other persons assign to them, that their value is dependent upon their utility to the dominant powers in society."

(St John B. Groser, Politics and Persons, 1949, 99.)

Nor is it enough to say that we fight fascism first and build socialism afterwards. Fascism flourishes in the absence of socialism: the creation of a socialist society is the only really effective way to defeat fascism.

Thirdly, there needs to be local action in the deprived and neglected areas which are the breeding ground for fascist groups. Often anti-fascists appear in these districts to be do-gooders and political activists from elsewhere who come for a season but are uninvolved in the real day by day lives of the people. Sometimes the fascist groups seem to them at least to understand their plight. To be a professional anti-fascist is no good: there needs to be a deep involvement in such issues as health care, tenants' rights, the care of the old and lonely, and so on. We need to be people who care more about the social evils which provide the raw material for racism and fascism than the racists and fascists do. Fascism cannot be defeated from a distance by people who are remote from the problems it manifests.

Finally, the message to the churches must surely be that at a time of growing anti-Semitism, the church must rediscover its essentially Jewish roots and the Jewish basis of its Gospel. Enshrined in the Law of Moses is the theme of the "Year of Jubilee", the expression of a hope for justice and freedom for this earth, its land and its people. In this "jubilee year" we are likely to hear a great deal of sentimental rubbish and are unlikely to hear the true meaning of Jubilee. It is useful therefore to recall the words of Father Stewart Headlam, once a curate in Bethnal Green, on the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria:

"The Queen's Jubilee is good: but the People's Jubilee is better.. For the Jubilee of the Hebrews...was the Jubilee of a whole People... 'Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.' That is the ideal of a true Year of Jubilee. ...restoration to the disinherited of their share in the land which the Lord their God giveth them and of which the injustice of their brother man has despoiled them."

A church with that vision would be no breeding ground for fascism.