

## Believing in Industry

The Abbey Works at Port Talbot was built after the Second World War alongside the old pre-war steelworks and was a major investment in British industry and a huge achievement in the private sector by the Steel Company of Wales. When Glyn Simon became Bishop of Llandaff in 1957 the Abbey Works had been operating for a few years and he saw the need to have some form of Christian mission in what was a major social, as well as industrial, institution in the South Wales area. He appointed me to be the industrial chaplain and I began work there in August 1960. It is not the purpose of this lecture to go into any detail about the day to day work of an industrial chaplain but rather to reflect upon the theological challenges of the experience, looking back some forty years.

At that time the works dominated the town of Port Talbot and employed 12,500 persons. At one end of the process there was the importation of iron ore, coal and limestone, and the other end there emerged rolled steel sheets for onward transmission to the motor car and other industries in the country and abroad. The employees were engaged in a vast number of activities, including heavy manual work at the furnaces, operating cranes and heavy plant, engineering maintenance, work in laboratories, drawing offices, and, of course, management structures.

The primary question in that context was "How does God relate to this industry?" It is clear simply from observation and experience that God does not intervene directly in the industrial process. There are no miracles saving men from tragic accidents for example. Also we would reject at once those who might claim to have a direct word from God telling them how to put the industry right. It is important to stress that we know nothing about the nature and will of God in Himself, all we can know is what others have told us, either through the Bible, pre-eminently the Word of God, or through the teaching of others, who have, of course, come to their knowledge of God mainly through the reading and understanding of the Bible.

Amongst the employees there were certainly a number of Christians who were bearing witness to their faith in word and action at their place of work to the best of their ability. The situation in Wales was rather different from that in England. In his book "Church and People in and Industrial City" Ted Wickham, the first industrial chaplain in Sheffield, demonstrated that the vast majority of the working classes had not been part of the church since the eighteenth century.

The situation in Wales was that throughout the period of industrialisation from the middle of the eighteenth century until the First World War the working classes had, in fact, been very much involved in the religious life and the revivals of religion in Wales. This meant that there was a stronger memory of the Christian religion in the minds of many of the employees than that found say in the steelworks in Sheffield where Ted Wickham established the Sheffield Industrial Mission.

Looking at the industry from outside, as it were, we see that it provided gainful, honest, interesting work and good careers for thousands of employees, and thus contributed very much to the material prosperity of the country. We came to the theological conclusion that it existed in God's providence and was part of his redemptive action in the modern world.

Historically church leaders like Pope Leo XIII and Archbishop William Temple had issued statements approving the development of industrial society but calling for certain standards and values to be achieved in industrial works, and so, in that sense, God was not without witness to industry.

However during my years as a chaplain in that industry I was never aware that the decisions of management were based on any religious document, certainly no manager or trade union leader ever consulted a religious leader about an industrial decision. The Christians employed in the works made their witness in peripheral things like bad language, or honesty, or the difficulty of Sunday shift work, the Church at that time had not trained its lay members to bear any meaningful witness to the actual needs and challenges of their work situation. The fact is that the industry was a secular institution, decisions were made on the basis of rational human considerations: the technical aspects of production, the profitability of the enterprise, the management of industrial relations, and so on. God was just not in the picture.

As the industrial chaplain I spent many hours with managers and employees discussing various aspects of the work experience, but more often than not the general discussions tended to focus on wider political matters. For example on one occasion when I took Bishop Glyn Simon on a visit to the works he met a group of middle rank managers in the engineering department office. The first point they raised was "Bishop, I don't agree with you about the bomb!" At that time the Bishop was known to be a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the ensuing discussion was on those lines and had nothing to do with the internal affairs of the industry.

Another characteristic of this secularised institution was its loss of objective moral standards. The social situation of such a large works developed its own morality. There was, of course, the general inheritance of the Judeo-Christian ethical traditional. But the sense of honour amongst the workforce was often different from that which would be thought of as the norm for traditional societies in which the religious establishment was strong. At the shop floor, for example, you didn't steal from your mates, but anything you could get out of the bosses was fair game. You could never "grass up" your mates, but anything was permissible in industrial relations confrontations.

A good example of the sense of the irrelevance of the Christian ethic in industry occurred in the 1970s when a strike by the engineering workers closed the plant for many weeks. The Bishop of Llandaff was active behind the scenes and eventually wrote an article for the Western Mail in which he called for a new system of training engineering apprentices to give them a greater sense of responsibility and ownership of their work. This caused great interest throughout the region but the management said that it was naïve and unrealistic. However when the strike was settled a few weeks later many of the Bishop's ideas were included in the settlement. This was put down to the Bishop's knowledge of social problems and educational systems. The Gospel of God got no acknowledgement.

It was clear to me at the time that the secular nature of the steelworks community was an example of the secular nature of the whole of Western society, and that there were many people thinking and writing about its meaning. During this period there appeared a number of important books relevant to our thinking. "The Secular City" by Harvey Cox described the nature of secularisation affecting every part of modern society. Secularisation was defined as the gradual loss of religious control in the public life of the world. Cox's thesis was that this

was a positive thing. Through secularisation God was calling the human race to adult maturity, to throw off the tutelage of religious establishment and to be challenged to stand on its feet and take its future into its own hands.

In "The Secular Meaning of the Gospel" Paul van Buren attempted to express the essence of the Christian Gospel in purely worldly language, making no reference to God, supernatural realities, heaven, miracles and so on. His principle concept was that of freedom. Jesus calls mankind to freedom: freedom from fear, freedom from guilt, and freedom from meaninglessness.

The publication of "Honest to God" by Bishop John Robinson surprised the world with a number of radical ideas which had been understood in academic circles for many years, but which had never been popularised. So the headline in the Sunday Observer "Our Image of God must go!" disturbed the establishment. It is true to say that the ideas in these books never really caught on in the mind of the church at that time. To be sure they remained on the academic agenda, and were to re-appear a generation later with Don Cupitt's book and television series "The Sea of Faith".

Secularisation, therefore, is an observable process in which we see a gradual loss of religious control in the public dimension of modern society. In industry the process seems to have reached its completion, there is no consciousness of God at any level. In other areas, for example in education and the army, there survives the appearance of religious influence if not control.

A secularised society is one in which religion does not have any power, but religious people as free citizens in a free society and can express their views and argue for social and political changes like any other citizen or social group. Secularism is an ideology, a set of social and political principles advocating the abolition of all religions as archaic and useless. We shall be looking at the challenges presented by this later on in the course.