

Title: Christians and poverty
Author: Norton, Richard
Awarded: 1983

Abstract:

This study explores the nature of contemporary British Poverty and some Christian responses to it. The first chapters examine the complex and politically controversial issues involved in the definitions of poverty; its causes and common assumptions which together influence our perception of it. The third and final chapter considers a range of theological, ethical and practical resources which some English churches currently employ in their attempts to provide a measured Christian response to the issue. It examines the extent to which a 'Church of the Poor' may be required to recover and develop an image of God among poor people. As a result of this investigation, it seems reasonably clear that the optimistic belief that poverty had been eradicated by the operation of the Welfare State during the 1950s and 1960s is as erroneous now as it was then. Poverty remains a central experience in the lives of many British people and this poses both a challenge and a problem to the churches. The exact nature of the challenge is, however, far from clear. Both the material and theological resources available to the churches may be diffuse and impair the extent and effectiveness of their action. The Christian response to Poverty raises central and important questions in social ethics because it suggests a reconsideration of the connections between church and state, religion and society, Christian philosophy and practice. Political considerations are included in this: 'to what extent are individuals responsible for the 'life-changes' of others?', 'do all citizens enjoy the same right of access to a basic standard of living?', 'how far, if at all, is the abolition or reduction of British Poverty consistent with the maintenance of an ethical, democratic social order in a free market economy?'. For the Christian, a consideration of the persistence of poverty is, in addition, a specific instance in which the question 'Who is my neighbour?' may be asked afresh. This entails a consideration of the obligations placed on individuals and Christian communities in virtue of their recognition of the impairment of the lives of some of these neighbours. A consideration of the major Christian responses to Poverty in Britain since 1974 provides no final answers to the problem, and it is not the purpose of this discussion to do so. It may however, be concluded that in the attempts to relieve and eradicate poverty, the church has a major role to play. This role is determined as much by effective action with, and in the interests of, poor people, as by the exercise of its traditional caution in matters of social concern. In order to achieve a balance between these two aspects, 'radical' changes in thought, structures and action, may be demanded. It is with these that this study is also concerned.