

Archbishop Welby: Absence of meaning has consequences



There is a need for deep repentance and a change in direction on the part of all those who control the resources of the planet, argues the archbishop of Canterbury.

Discontent is growing in western democracies as evidenced by Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of populism. Dr Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and primate of the Anglican communion shares his views with La Croix.

Both Brexit and the recent election of Donald Trump have illustrated the anger of voters. How would you explain that?

Dr Justin Welby: This anger expresses an absence of hope and major disillusionment. Since the crisis of 2008, the idols of our western society have fallen. The Gods who promised us wealth and hope have gone bankrupt. These priests and gods – this is a metaphor – are the politicians and economists who affirm that the economy is the ultimate end.

Let's take the United States. The lower and middle classes have the same level of income today as in 1998. For the first time since the Second World War, a generation thinks its children will be poorer and that they themselves will end up poorer than they began. This generates anger.

All the more so since our culture has distanced itself from its Judeo-Christian roots that helped balanced it. We now experience the consequences of the absence of meaning given to existence and the absence of faith in eternal life. Our powerful individualism is the result of post-modernity, an absolute sentiment that my personal truth is the only truth, that my future is the only future that counts. When someone takes this dream away from me, I lose a sense of eternity, family and community.

However, this anger also seems to have affected other countries besides the West which was impacted by the crisis...

J.B.: That's true. We also observe anger rising against a reality common to all western and emerging

countries, namely globalization. It is striking to observe a return to religious violence. This is the case with Hinduism – national Hinduism, Buddhism with the radicals in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, among the Jewish radicals in the north of Israel who attack churches, in the Muslim world evidently and among Christians in Central African Republic or among the Christian militias that have attacked mosques. Our generation had believed that religious violence belonged to the past. This is not the case. The explanations are sociological as well as religious.

The world economy is dominated by the law of the market. It seems to exclude the eternal values of each of these societies. In the face of this extremely rapid change, people have become worried, cautious and tend to hide behind what they believe to be their identities. So is the issue the speed of change?

J.B.: The acceleration of things is extraordinary. New information technologies too. If I want to know what happened in Gujarat, India, I simply go to the internet. I will find the declarations of a political leader but without having any idea of what is in his heart. A few weeks ago in Abu Dhabi, we discussed with Anglican and Muslim leaders from around the world. Seated together, looking each other in the eyes, we had discussions that were sometimes difficult. However, we were able to also talk together during the coffee break and say: “My dear brother, let me explain what I was trying to say...” We cannot do that with social networks.

How can people overcome their anger?

J.B.: There is no magic formula. But we need to fight inequalities, particularly in finance, education, housing, health and the environment. Governments need to show clearly that they are on the side of the poor. Speaking as a Christian, this requires a deep repentance and a change in direction on the part of all those who control the resources of the planet. We cannot consider only our own interests. This is the priority. Globalization needs to rediscover a vision by which it will be at the service of the poor, without which it will have no moral right to exist. Look at what happened in Europe after 1945. The immense impulse of generosity set off by the Marshall Plan. The United States sent over colossal sums of money to prevent famine in Europe. We need a similar impulse of generosity from the rich countries.

These so-called “rich” countries are also accumulating debt. Is this another source of anger?

J.B.: We need to raise the issue of our debt. These are often contracted with other countries, particularly with China. If we wish to confront the problems of globalization, we need to take into account the imprisonment that this debt represents.

It is a prison for a country, for individuals and above all for the imagination. It obliges to look behind and not to the future. Today, we need to confront the moral bankruptcy of our economy, to say that one cannot continue to go ahead with a system based on debt that makes us work for the rich instead of building for the poor. If we do not confront this reality within our Churches as well as within our societies, then nothing will change.

What vision can we give back to the West for it to become capable of generosity? How to infuse a new spirit of hope?

J.B.: In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict evokes the need the concept of gratuity more prominently into our Christian social doctrine. This is a genuine path. Secondly, in order to respond to the anger, it will be necessary to show that people are listening and to understand that anger. This does not mean encouraging or nourishing this anger. Governments need to recognize their failures without blaming others. We all need to work together for the renewal of the community. Certainly people have their own interests. They always have and always will. However it also happens that they vote with generosity when they are able to see clearly what is good and that it will enrich society. In the United Kingdom, we now devote 0.7% of our GDP to the development of the least developed countries. We achieved this objective in the midst of a recession! We proved that it is possible to have a vision at this level!

Interviewed by Pierre Cochez and Céline Hoyeau^{Note(1)}

La Croix met Archbishop Welby during his visit to Paris to received an honorary doctorate from the Catholic Institute of Paris on the occasion of the inauguration of the professorial chair of the Common Good in November.

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