

# Shaking the Foundations

A Sociological and Biblical Perspective

Christmas 2008

## Five Institutions

A complex modern urban industrial society is composed of hundreds of social institutions of different size and significance. These vary from the local golf club and Women's Institute to great national institutions such as the Health Service. But sociologists recognise five major social institutions that form the foundations of society upon which the whole social structure stands and depends for its stability. They also recognise an invariable rule that governs the processes of social change. The rule states **when significant change takes place in any one of the five major social institutions all the others are affected**. Change in any one of the five creates a domino effect that runs right through each of the others. The 'Major Social Institutions' are: -

- The Economy
- The Family
- Education
- Law and government
- Religion

## An Example from History

The changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution that transformed the social landscape of 18th-century Britain started in the economy. It all began with a change in the means of production from rural-based handcraft to factory-based mass production. Family life was changed as people moved into the new urban complexes. New laws were required regulating city life. Education had to be formalised. Moral values and religious beliefs were affected. This led Karl Marx erroneously to conclude that the economy is the major engine of social change. Recent history challenges this.

## The Present Situation

Since the 1960s Western nations have undergone a social revolution the outcome of which it is still too early to assess due to its unique sociological character. Changes have been generated in each of the five major social institutions. These changes have both affected and been affected by changes in the each of other social institutions which has created a highly volatile situation which has shaken the traditional norms that form the sub-structure of society.

**In the Family**, revolutionary changes have taken place, from extended family to single parenthood, from children being under strict discipline to the predominance of children's rights.

**In Education**, revolutionary changes have taken place from secondary modern to comprehensive, from 10% to half of the nation's children receiving higher education, from corporal punishment to children not being touched.

**In Law**, revolutionary changes have affected every part of the life of the nation - the Abolition of the Death Penalty 1965, The Abortion Act 1967, The Plowden Report on Education 1967, The Sexual Offences Act 1967, The Theatres Act 1968, The Divorce Reform Act, 1969 - to mention but a few.

**In Religion**, revolutionary changes in our churchgoing habits plus the impact of immigration bringing other religions into Britain for the first time in 2000 years have challenged our traditional values and beliefs.

**In The Economy**, despite all these revolutionary social changes, the economy has survived boom and bust cycles and remained relatively stable since the Great Depression triggered by the 1929 financial panic. It was always predictable that with 40 years of rapid social change undermining the value system upon which the global system of financial exchange depended, a collapse was inevitable.

**The financial crisis** that has spread rapidly across the world in the past few months is not simply due to changes in the economy. Indeed, it is not even primarily an economic problem as has been widely recognised in the press and by political and economic commentators. The problems in the banking industry are connected with greed and the insatiable drive to increase profits and personal bonuses as well as to the vast build-up of debt that until recently depended upon trust. Once trust was broken the whole system began to collapse like a pack of cards.

**The current situation** facing all Western nations is that they have each undergone a generation of rapid and radical social change, but due to the universality of systems of communication and cultural exchange the problems generated have become global. There is no identifiable means either of slowing down the rate of social change or of dealing with its effects. Now that the economy is generating major changes, unless the rate of change is controlled in the other major social institutions, the whole social system in Western nations is in danger of collapse. With unemployment set to rise we may expect a steep increase in crime and violent behaviour, especially among disaffected young people and those from dysfunctional home backgrounds.

**The value-system** underlying the foundations of society holds the key to social change. But with no moral absolutes and only a system of ethical relativism to direct the affairs of the nation it is impossible to achieve stability. ***If the problems in the economy are not primarily due to failures of economic policy then their solution will not be found by adjusting economic policy.*** The resolution of the present situation depends upon a re-examination of our values where the heart of the present crisis is located. But social and personal values are rooted in our belief system. As a nation with a strong Judeo-Christian heritage this requires the rediscovery of biblical truth.

**The great biblical prophets** would surely be pointing to the faith of our forefathers and the covenant relationship that has existed with God; how he has watched over and protected the nation in times of great danger; he has used the nation to take the gospel across the world and has blessed Britain with prosperity and peace when the nation has been faithful to his teaching.

They would be declaring that as a nation we have despised our Godly heritage, enacted laws that are directly opposed to the Word of God, and produced a generation of children and young people without firm moral and spiritual foundations. Then we wonder why so many are psychologically unstable, why we have such high youth offending rates, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, drugs and alcohol-related problems.

**A biblical principle** is that God requires much of those to whom he has entrusted much. God is warning Britain that we are greatly at risk because we have despised the blessings he has heaped upon us and chosen to walk a path that is bringing dishonour to the name of God. The world knows that Christianity is enshrined in our national heritage. But our national life is a disgrace. Muslims who have come to live among us recognise this and try to protect their children from the moral pollution with which we have flooded the land. We dishonour the Christian faith.

**Repentance** is the only way forward because we have brought disgrace upon the name of Jesus which is bringing judgment upon us. God is saying, 'I have spoken to you again and again but you have not paid attention or listened to me. . . . Therefore, I am going to bring upon you every disaster I have pronounced against you' (Jeremiah 35. 15 - 17). But God is also reminding us of his promise, "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned" (Jeremiah 18.7).

The straight choice facing us is - repentance or disaster.

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