

# On Rock or Sand? Firm Foundations for Britain's future

Edited by Archbishop John Sentamu

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## Background, Content and Quality

The origins of this book lie in April 2010 when the Archbishop of York noted the financial depression and considered whether there was a way for the Church to effectively articulate a message of hope. With such a national crisis any response needed to be more than superficial platitudes and so a group of experts was gathered together; their task was to consider not only the policies by which society should be governed, but also the underlying virtues and principles that should be the foundation for a healthy society. A review of what is actually happening in the UK was also incorporated and compared with the Christian principles identified – as Sentamu puts it "a holistic health check to discover whether Britain has firm foundations on which to build for the future" (p.xiv).

Over the next four years the group met and discussed. Individuals then drew together their thinking in a collection of essays covering such areas as: the economy; poverty; education; healthcare; work; ageing; children and young people and the Welfare State. The expert panel included Justin Welby, Lord Adonis and others of similar calibre.

Often a collection of essays can be a mixed bag with regard to quality. I found all the essays were of a high standard. Again and again the contributors picked up on vital issues. For example what consideration is being given to the injustice revealed by the fact that life expectancy for men born in Kensington is 10 years more than for men born in Manchester? Why is our culture so frenetically orientated towards youth? Why is there so little engagement in politics? (voting numbers are low and there is a great lack of accountability, as well as participation).

## General Relevance

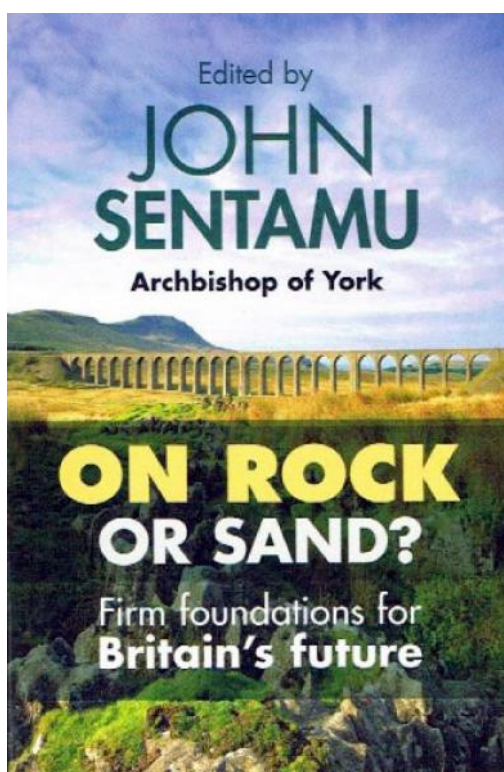
The book was published in advance of the General Election – a particularly appropriate time for the Church to speak out – to seek to point to a vision of what a "good" society might look like. The General Election made the book particularly relevant but in my opinion an important role for the church is always the prophetic one – pointing toward a more excellent way. Such signposting by the church occurs more often on the individual level. It is refreshing to find a strong prophetic voice speaking to national issues, although of course the values applicable to national issues also need to be worked out in the local and individual theatres.

Some politicians have been very quick to dismiss the content of the book. Given the length of time the book took to produce and the collective experience of the contributors the one response that is inappropriate is a kneejerk rejection.

## Overall Conclusions

With essays covering a wide range of subjects from a variety of contributors it would be no surprise if the book were disjointed. This is far from the case. Common themes in each essay form the foundation stones

of a central premise: that our national thinking is dominated by consumerism, individualism and transaction. What would the political debate sound like if it embraced mutualism, responsibility and co-operation as its central tenets? What if we recognised that all in society are created in the image of God (equality)? What if we were collectively committed to offering everyone the opportunity to flourish (equity)? What if we appreciated our inter-connectedness as humans living in relationship and community (solidarity); or if we accepted more fully



our responsibility to take care of ourselves (autonomy)? The Christian faith acknowledges the infinite value and uniqueness of all individuals.

But it does not support individualism in which each person pursues their own selfish desires. Rather it calls on each person to take individual responsibility for neighbours – we are our brother's keeper! And it goes further in asserting our inter-connectedness and community, most strongly in Paul's reference to the Body of Christ.

There has been much talk about "British Values". Such talk seems largely irrelevant because there is no agreement as to what British values actually are. In this book there is a genuine attempt to pin down those values which the Christian Church would want to support. There is also an attempt to assess whether the way that Britain currently operates conforms to those values. Sadly the conclusion is that there are many large divergences. Britain appears to be a place of weak community, inequality and injustice.

The case should not be overstated; the authors are at pains to point out some of the many good things that are happening and the enormous strides forward that have been taken. Nonetheless the Archbishop is calling for a change in perspective. This is shown very clearly by the dedication – "to hard pressed families on poverty wages".

### Relevance to Business

Some of the chapters are more relevant than others. Justin Welby writes eloquently on "Building the Common Good". He takes a radical approach based on the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (although few employers would want to follow the vineyard owner's specific policies). British Values of individualism and competition decree that it is quite acceptable for there to be a huge disparity between the well off and the poor; between the employed and the unemployed. He calls for a stronger sense of solidarity and community in which people are recognised as being made in the image of God and are committed to one another in mutually beneficial relationship (rather than the strong exploiting the weak). He notes that in the UK there are not only individuals left behind but also areas and regions. To address this he writes "We must seek to cultivate a vineyard with room for everyone to work ... and live with


stability and hope. This will only come .... through commitment to solidarity and recognition of the inherent dignity of the person outside and beyond economic values" (p.29). In Welby's view a society that allows members to be discarded or left behind is not acceptable; he calls for: "a living wage; good housing; excellent education and training and better financial access" (p.45).

In his chapter on the relevance of work, Oliver O'Donovan considers what good work should provide to the individual carrying out the work. Challenging questions are asked about the morality of some types of work (which allow for no creativity) and also methods of securing flexible labour that give no security to the worker. I was challenged: how much do I consider our workers to be units of labour as opposed to infinitely valuable children of God; how strongly are businesses driven by short-term profit maximisation rather than the good of all stakeholders?

### Conclusion and Challenges

Some readers may think that the book expresses an "Old Labour" or Socialist viewpoint and so feel justified in ignoring it. This would be a mistake for two reasons. Firstly while it is true that there is a strong appeal to the law-makers to take account of deprivation there is also a strong call to individuals and the voluntary sector to be more active. Secondly we do well to remember that legislation can be a powerful force for good – that the NHS was brought in by "Old Labour" and thousands of lives have been saved due to good laws, such as control of drink driving and making seat-belts compulsory.

I am certain that this book represents a prophetic voice for our nation at this time. However the nature of prophets is that they are voices crying in the wilderness and are regularly not listened to or ignored. So the first challenge is "How can the book get a wider reading?" Will the Church of God take the prophetic voice seriously? If not then it would be no surprise that the rest of society ignores it.

The second challenge is how can we make changes – both as individuals and as a nation? When looking at the differences between the values championed by Archbishop John Sentamu and his team and those prevalent in society we see a huge discrepancy. Effectively the Church is calling for a change in the ruling Zeitgeist. Quite a challenge! And the challenge starts with us. 



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