Renewal

Religion and politics

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Labour ignores religion at its peril. For religion – or rather, faith – is an important link to the progressive consensus that we represent and from which we seek support. Such a statement should not be controversial, for Labour's roots lie in religious conviction. The problem is that today many politicians, of all parties, do not understand religious faith. This is despite much increased discussion of faith issues following the terrible July 7th bombings in London and, before that, the attacks on America in 2001 by religious fundamentalists. Labour has been influenced by Christian faith. Faith of all sorts continues to play a role in our society. We need fresh thinking about the interaction between faith and politics. We cannot afford to leave this ground open to the Conservatives, given our heritage.

Faith in the Labour Party

'The Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marxism' is a mantra still repeated today[1]. In essence, this reflects the fact that Labour Party socialism has never been predominantly dogmatic in nature; it has stemmed not from communist pamphlets but from the organisation of working people around a strong conviction that all have equal worth and should therefore have equal opportunities in life. This conviction arose either directly from the Christian faith (particularly non conformist) or indirectly through the outworking of democratic thought through society. Western liberal democracy is based on the Christian principle that people have equal worth before God, translated into equality before the law (see Siedentop, 2001). Over many centuries, this equality principle was extended and worked itself out through society. Milestones along the way included the abolition of slavery and the various reform acts. Thus Kier Hardie was able to see his Christian faith and political convictions as synonymous and RH Tawney was able to write in his diary on 6 March 1930 that

> In order to believe in human equality it is necessary to believe in God. It is only when one contemplates the infinitely great that human differences appear so infinitely small as to be negligible … What is wrong with the modern world is that having ceased to believe in the greatness of God, and therefore, the infinite smallness (or greatness, the same thing!) of man, it has to invent or emphasise distinctions between men (quoted in Thomson, 1999).

This is not to suggest that Labour is or should be a religious party, or that atheists, agnostics and people of other religious convictions have not also played a fundamental role, at many times more so. It should also be noted that members of other faiths are also now thinking about how their faith perspective can contribute to progressive politics. I simply maintain that the 'Christian Socialist' heritage of the Party is often downplayed.[2]

Politicians have to tread carefully when talking about their own religious convictions. In recent Labour history there have been two moments when Labour leaders have discussed their convictions. In 1993 John Smith gave the Christian Socialist Movement's annual Tawney Lecture, which he entitled 'Reclaiming the Ground'. He stated that 'Just as the Christian stands by the fundamental tenets of Christianity, so the socialist should stand by the tenets of socialism. For me, socialism is largely Christian ethical values…Politics is a moral activity. Values should shine through at all times.' (Smith, 1993). These were significant comments for the time because a political leader was talking about his personal faith. Predictably, Smith's comments were misrepresented as suggesting that Labour was the only party for Christians, something he repudiated.

Three years later, in an interview with the Sunday Telegraph, Tony Blair said 'My view of Christian values led me to oppose what I perceived to be a narrow view of self-interest that Conservatism – particularly in its modern form – represents.' (Blair, 1996). In the same interview, he stated his belief that 'The Left got into trouble when its basic values became divorced from …ethical socialism, in which Christian Socialism is included.' Echoing Smith, he stressed that there were Christians with different political convictions who supported political parties other than Labour. Nevertheless, his comments produced some adverse reaction and Downing Street has been careful about mentioning the Prime Minister's religious faith. In reality, what people tend to dislike is not so much religious faith held by politicians as any hint of self righteousness (which Blair was at pains to avoid). This is a healthy attitude but when cynicism becomes unchecked it can bury all discussion of faith matters from our political life.

However, in their comments both Smith and Blair were able to identify with a progressive moral consensus in the country, without preaching or excluding others who held different beliefs. This consensus has been identified by Gordon Brown as arising from 'churches, faith groups, and all decent minded people' (Brown, September 2005). They are mentioned in his speeches, especially when he refers to work to eradicate global poverty or to a moral ethos inspiring people in the public sector.

Faith in our country

We often hear that the UK is a secular country. This seems clear. Regular outward forms of religious belief are not apparent in most people's lives. Nevertheless, the 2001 census found that 71.7 per cent of the population identified itself as Christian, with the total recording religious belief at 77.5 per cent (Islam was the next most significant at 3 per cent). Douglas Alexander, while arguing that progressive politics has moral foundations, compares the extent of religious belief in the UK with that of the USA and cites the census figures (Alexander 2005). However, he notes a MORI poll that found only 18 per cent identified themselves as practising members of an organised religion (www.mori.com/polls/2003/bbc-heavenandearth-top.shtml). This contrasts with religious belief in the United States, where a large proportion of the population attends church regularly. Nevertheless, the evidence is ambiguous. The MORI poll finds that only 12 per cent regard themselves as atheist and 14 per cent as agnostic. The British Social Attitudes surveys tend to give lower percentages holding religious belief but they are still high.

Adherents and activists – some comparisons and highlights

Labour has less than 300,000 members and the Conservative membership figure is probably not much different. Of those members, in both cases the numbers attending regular meetings is much smaller. Party membership is often compared disparagingly with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The RSPB has over 1 million members. Each year, 11,900 volunteers provide active assistance in some way. The organisation's largest event is the Big Garden Birdwatch, which involves over half a million people (Introducing the RSPB, www.rspb.org.uk). Yet church activism is greater still. The Church of England has 1.7 million people attending services at least once a month. At these services, people will participate and usually listen to a talk that could last from five minutes to half an hour or more. Christmas services attract 2.6 million people and 40 per cent of the population attend Christmas services in a Christian denomination (www.cofe.anglican.org/about/thechurchofenglandtoday/). There are churches and other religious organisations in every community in the country, often acting where government agencies are not effective or present.

Religious beliefs can lead to political actions. The Jubilee 2000 campaign to cancel developing world debt was supported by churchgoers, as was MakePovertyHistory. At the demonstrations in Birmingham in 1998 and Edinburgh in 2005 were many church members on their first march. In 2004, 10,000 young people in the UK linked with 750 churches in London and worked on over 420 community projects over two weeks in an event called SOULINTHECITY. These included help renovating estates, gardening, and

sports programmes. The fortnight concluded with a rally of 15,000 people in Trafalgar Square. These are just some examples of how faith motivates large groups of people in our society.

Faith in national life

Faith plays another role too. Christianity remains the national religion. The Church of England still manages our national funeral and memorial services, with very few objections. When, in times of national mourning, people wish to reflect on the spiritual side of life, they still tend to turn to the church which retains some authority to speak on these occasions. Bishops do not have the automatic respect they once enjoyed, but still in some sense the church and other faiths do act as the moral voice in society. That voice may not always reflect the moral centre of gravity of the population but more often than not it does. Nevertheless, where once state and faith were one there is now a disconnection.

Faith communities can present political challenges

Faith communities are not simply voluntary associations operating within our liberal democracy. If they were, they would be equivalent to trade unions, political parties or the RSPB itself. They are an odd mix of the involuntary and voluntary. Some can indeed be quite absolutist in the demands placed on members and these in particular raise new challenges for liberal democracies based on individual equality before the law. There is an impact on society as a whole, which has concerned Michael Walzer:

> Religious believers and political militants tend to post the question…How would we organise civil society if we had the chance? Or, what would civil society look like if everyone shared our faith or ideology?...
>
> …We commonly encounter groups that reject the deepest values of the liberal democratic state that frames and protects them, and that also reject the values of the wide-ranging and disorganised civil society in which they find a place (Walzer 2004).

In these cases, Walzer argues, the groups may contain inequalities between members or demand additional rights and this presents a problem for a liberal democracy.

The recent debate over whether Muslim girls should wear the hijab at school is an interesting example. France has reasserted its anti-religious state secularism in response and tightened rules on displays of any religious affiliation. In the UK, a pragmatic approach has meant that schools have been given flexibility on uniform rules, though this relaxed approach conveniently ignores the wider issues.

It would have been better in both cases if the opportunity were taken to emphasise equality of choice. If someone can make a free choice to practice their beliefs, they should be able to do so as long as the rights of others are not infringed.

Faith in the public square – developing an approach

Both Christianity and Islam are by their nature already in the public square, perhaps more so than other faiths. They are proselytising religions – a believer wishes others to be convinced and have faith too. Both are political. Christianity looks not only for the kingdom of heaven in the life to come but also works for it in this life. Islam has a political dimension. This was Keir Hardie's socialism. Both faiths also look beyond national boundaries. Christianity recognises the 'fellowship of all believers' or universal church. Islam recognises the worldwide Muslim community. For many people, religious faith drives their entire outlook on life in a way that membership of a club or society cannot.

Therefore, a healthy liberal democracy is one where faith groups can be heard in the public square, acknowledging the religious heritage of our polity and subject to the principles of equality: equality of choice of worldview; freedom to change worldview; freedom of speech; all arguments equally subject to testing and debate. Inter-faith dialogue will be honest, respecting the differences between worldviews while finding common values. Find an evangelical Christian minister working on a social project with an 'orthodox' imam and there you will find the seeds of genuine cooperation between faith groups. It also requires us to think carefully about what is fundamental to citizenship in our democracy and what we do not need to argue about. It also raises a unique question for us in the UK. Should the state be completely neutral in faith matters and does that mean disestablishing the Church of England? In fact, to do so might actually be counter productive, even if an ideal democracy would not have an established church.

If instead, faith is actively denied a space or ignored by the state and media, faith communities can feel excluded and alienated from government and politics. In some circumstances, a very few extremists can get a foothold and extreme measures justified as ways of being heard. The extremist searches too keenly for the final straw that proves society is beyond redemption, the new law that is a step too far. Extreme measures become valid responses in such a warped view. This might include violent demonstrations and for some horribly distorted minds, acts of terror. We have seen examples from various religious groups around the world and in our own country. An inter-faith dialogue that involves only 'liberal' faith leaders and ignores different fundamentals of faith disenfranchises many. Another danger is over compensation – public officials avoiding religious terms such as 'Christmas' for fear of causing offence, when in reality denial of our religious heritage is seen as a negative by people of other faiths.

Finding common ground

A healthy approach to faith by the state offers the prospect of going some way to developing an honest dialogue about the moral values we hold in common. The need for this is well understood. David Goodhart states that 'The political challenge is to create a minimum degree of moral consensus and solidarity in an otherwise highly pluralistic society' (Goodhart 2005) yet he is too pessimistic about the degree of consensus that exists at present. Labour with its Christian Socialist roots, laden with values, can help forge a public ethic for the twenty-first century. Not a 'back to basics' hypocrisy but the moral consensus we are seeking on the value of democracy, civil liberties, equality and fairness.

The political challenge

If one still doubts that faith should be important to Labour, one has only to imagine the New Tory leader David Cameron talking at some future date about the importance of religious faith. Such a public move would be in line with his apparent strategy of moving Tory tanks onto Blairite lawns. Religious people tend to vote. The fact that Iain Duncan Smith is an advisor to the new leadership on 'social justice' issues means that it is still probable that the Conservative Party will attempt to make strong links between its policies and the convictions of religious groups. The echoes of the early George W Bush will be heard again, singing the praises of 'faith-based action' in communities. In this case as with other voluntary groups, they will be used as 'a weapon in the battle against any role for government' (Brown, December 2005).

Instead, Labour has a positive case. In government we are working with community faith groups. We live in a pluralistic society with millions holding religious beliefs and putting them into practice in some way. This is Labour's heritage. We should embrace it and we can do so without in any way alienating people (including members) who are not religious. Our MPs and candidates should visit more churches and other religious meeting places. We should revisit the strands of ethical socialism that helped to lead to the birth of the Party. In doing so, we identify with community activists and church groups, and help to embed Labour more deeply in the lifeblood of the nation.

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[1] This quote is sometimes attributed to Harold Wilson but the Dictionary of Labour Quotations locates it from Morgan Philips, a past Labour Party General Secretary as cited in Callaghan, J 1987 Time and Chance. Bryant suggests Arthur Henderson, a Methodist himself, may be the original source while noting that the reference is really to non conformism, since the Wesleyan branch of Methodism was regarded at one time as conservative in nature.

[2] Useful surveys of the role of Christianity can be found in God's Politicians (Dale, 2000) and of Christian Socialism in Possible Dreams (Bryant, 1996).