

## Christianity and the Political Parties

KLICE and Bible Society

*This article reports on a major project delivered jointly by KLICE and the Bible Society to help equip Christians engage faithfully in party politics. The project was launched in September 2010 with the appearance of three publications exploring the relationship between Christianity and the three main British political parties.*

### Introduction

*David Landrum and Jonathan Chaplin write...*

KLICE and the Bible Society are partnering in a exciting project called *Partisan*. The project's aim is to stimulate new and robust Christian political reflection within British political parties. It has been launched at a paradoxical time. Presently, the public role of religion in the UK is both expanding and deepening. At the same time, it is attracting fierce criticism from increasingly assertive secularists. This makes the need for fresh insight on how Christianity relates to British parties an urgent priority.

KLICE and the Bible Society commissioned Stephen Backhouse, Paul Bickley and Joshua Hordern to write extended essays which would engage – appreciatively but frankly – with the history, theology and broad policy orientations of the party traditions to which they were assigned. In this *Ethics in Brief*, the three authors highlight the key ideas in their respective essays.

They were invited to identify the characteristic historical and contemporary 'gifts' given by the Christian faith to the party tradition in question, but also to employ insights from Christian political theology to confront the party's vulnerabilities or 'Achilles heels' where they found them. Each offers a particular (theological) reading of the history and contemporary condition of the political party concerned.

The *Partisan* project aims to bring fresh theological depth, self-awareness, and critical potential to conversations already underway about the contribution of Christian faith to British party politics. The essays leave no doubt that Christianity has made notable – at times perhaps even decisive – contributions to the thinking and practice of the parties. At the same time, they proceed from the recognition that today these contributions are not only ignored by many, but also often resisted or derided by some voices within the parties. Among the latter are those who still subscribe to the discredited – yet surprisingly tenacious – social-scientific myth that modernisation necessarily (and rightly) brings with it the privatisation of religion and the secularisation of the public square. The *Partisan* project sets itself squarely against that myth and seeks to underline the legitimacy of a wide variety of faith-based contributions to political debate, within an open democratic forum in which robust political parties will continue to play an indispensable role.

### Experiments in Living: Christianity and the Liberal Democrat Party

*Stephen Backhouse writes...*

The Liberal Democrats are the smallest party with the biggest ideas. The very bigness of their central idea – liberalism – perhaps explains the smallness of the party. If you value liberty of conscience and

freedom of association, think individuals should not be cowed by groups and value tolerance and fairness, then you are a liberal, even if you do not vote for the Liberal Democrats. Liberalism is now pervasive in our society and no one political party can claim sole ownership. But the Liberal Democrats are distinctive. As torch holders for explicit liberalism, their ideological influence on our already 'liberal' society blazes brightly.

But liberalism itself demands analysis, especially by Christian citizens. For liberalism and Christianity are bedfellows, albeit at times uneasy ones. Liberalism, and the party which takes its name, is historically inextricable from certain forms of the Christianity which originally nurtured it. Indeed, liberalism sprang from Christianity. Its care for the liberty of individual human beings is a product of revolutionary seeds sown by the earliest Christians two thousand years ago. Today it is liberal cultures that best provide space for the Church to flourish as a social experiment.

The essay is divided into four parts. Part One considers how the Christian influences at the roots of British liberalism and the Liberal party have shaped our cultural landscape – in particular the High Anglicanism of William Gladstone and the Nonconformist conscience of the disestablishmentarians.

Part Two focuses on liberalism as a political philosophy of liberty by examining the role of 'freedom' in Christian and secular thought. There are two main strands of 'freedom' in operation: a largely secular sense of 'freedom from' all constraints and a largely Christian sense of 'freedom to' flourish in a particular way. Since these two freedoms do not always coincide, points of congruence and tension are considered.

Part Three takes a close look at the important category of 'personhood', examining the development of the idea of the 'individual' and the Christian roots of 'human rights'. In the present age much of the rhetoric of personhood and human rights makes no reference to Christianity. The discussion concludes by questioning the track record and ability of purely humanist liberalism in upholding and maintaining liberal human rights.

Finally, Part Four looks at 'equality', a vital theme in both Christianity and liberalism. The roles of fairness and equal tolerance in Christian theology as well as modern liberal discourse are assessed. Liberal society requires tolerance but is unsure how to tolerate individuals and groups who depart from the norm, especially when it comes to religion. The now commonplace liberal solution of tolerating religion only so long as it stays in a supposed 'private' sphere is shown to be politically and theologically incoherent.

The essay appeals instead to the traditional liberal impulse that sees different ideological groups as 'experiments in living' deserving of equal opportunity to sink or swim. It argues that if anyone cares about the advancement of humanity, equality and liberty, they would do well to attend to Church as an experiment in living – an experiment that has yielded astonishing results and has the potential to remain a critical but faithful friend to the people of our liberal society.

### **Building Jerusalem? Christianity and the Labour Party**

*Paul Bickley writes...*

The Labour Party has historically been ideologically plural – 'a broad movement on behalf of the bottom dog', as GDH Cole once put it. The Christian social tradition has been similarly diverse. The essay falls into three parts looking at key figures and debates in the nineteenth, twentieth and then twenty-first centuries. The discussion covers Victorian Christian socialism in the Biblical radicalism of the Chartists and Kier Hardie, FD Maurice's carefully constructed theological critique of the competitive principle, and also the Labour Church movement which more or less elided the Christian faith with the Independent Labour Party.

In the twentieth century, the discussion turns to the Roman Catholic Social Teaching of *Rerum Novarum* and RH Tawney's keen moral and economic critique of the acquisitive society. Tawney's thought, in particular, is given extended analysis. He argued that an over-powerful state could demean and dehumanise at least as much as an unfettered market could. 'However the socialist ideal may be expressed', he wrote, 'few things could be more remote from it than a herd of tame animals with wise rulers in command'.

At no point in this narrative did the Christian social tradition ever come into such a cosy relationship with the forces and interests of the market as did New Labour at the turn of the twenty-first century. Indeed, against these forces it has always provided help to the left's moral protest. So what did Christianity gain by being so closely identified with New Labour? For Smith, Blair and Brown did not just identify as Christians. Rather, they consciously used the resources of their faith to help weave their respective political projects.

For Smith, his faith provided him with the moral backdrop against which a protest against the acquisitive spirit of Thatcherism could be made. Blair's Christianity helped him to construct a communitarian discourse, and so offer something of a plug for the hole left by loss of ideological energy in the Labour Party. For Brown, the biblical tradition was a rhetorical source, *par excellence*, for both a justification for the active state (remember "we will not walk by on the other side") and for prophetic injunctions for justice, which he applied in particular to the development agenda.

That Blair and Brown, unlike many of the earlier figures, were politicians is a legitimate explanation of why New Labour's appropriation of Christianity was superficial. Yet superficial it was, and many hold the view that nothing has been so damaging to Christian Socialism's public witness than a political project that was essentially a compromise of the left, with its traditional critique of the interests of capital bartered for electoral advantage.

This was a sensible electoral equation, but it leaves Christian Socialism somewhat used and abused. It is in need of reviving its intellectual heritage, reasserting something of its independent voice, and remembering that it addresses more than issues of global poverty and development. By drawing on the historical and conceptual range of the Christian social tradition, this essay represents a contribution towards meeting that need.

### **One Nation but Two Cities: Christianity and the Conservative Party**

*Josh Hordern writes...*

The combination of Conservatism and Christianity does not necessarily make a happy marriage. The

essay takes a critical look at how the relationship has gone over the years and what key themes – 'arteries of the conservative heart' – have kept things together. The essay title highlights the Christian idea that the UK contains two *peoples* of flesh and blood: the earthly city of all the people who live in the UK, including all the Christians; and, within that earthly city, the City of God, the Christian church. Some people, Christians, are members of both cities. The argument is that when the church is the church, this is good news for the One Nation vision of British Conservatism described in the essay.

Part One is an *illustrative* history, covering ground from the fourteenth century theologian John Wycliffe, through Edmund Burke, David Hume, Adam Smith and the birth of the Conservative Party, illustrating issues such as religious liberty, education policy, social injustice, electoral reform, taxation and war. A key thread concerns how Conservatives reconcile free marketeering with healthy, stable communities. The history tracks this troubling issue through to the Thatcherite period and the present day, including Margaret Thatcher's famous (or, for some, infamous) 'Sermon on the Mound' where she expounded the text 'If a man shall not work he shall not eat!'

Part Two describes three arteries of the conservative heart which can keep conservatism alive and healthy: (i) trust, (ii) the distinction between state and society and (iii) business. Conservation and trust should go hand in hand, as we carefully conserve the goods we have been given. But what is trust? The essay suggests that God's commitment to entrust the world to humankind is the basis for people to entrust their inheritance (both private wealth and common goods) to future generations, thereby building intergenerational and social trust. Accordingly, when distrust and suspicion flourish it is because people have been entrusted, not with goods, but with evils such as crippling debt.

The Conservative Party's contribution towards building trust has been mixed. But the traditional conservative distinction between state and society, which has powerful theological resonances, is key to the flourishing of a 'Big Society' of trusting relationships and social capital. The government must have sufficient strength to maintain the rule

of law. But its main activity should be to provide openings for civil society to 'put the ball in the back of the net'.

The activity of business, an aspect of civil society, is important here. Through business and markets, we learn to value the things which can be bought with money, showing what we think is good and valuable about the world entrusted to us. This learning can build social trust as people agree on the value of the goods they trade and share. Banking is shown to have got this disastrously wrong by departing on a flight of fancy with securitised mortgages floating free of the actual bricks and mortar down on planet earth. The essay suggests some ways to reverse this trend and invites all people, including Christians in their distinctive way, to join in the task of refreshing the arteries of the conservative heart and so contribute to the health of the One Nation we all share.

## **Conclusion**

These essays offer one modest contribution to a debate that needs to take place at many levels and to involve a wide range of participants – and not only Christians. Yet, given the widespread popular disillusionment with and disengagement from party politics – indeed from the whole political process – in recent years, the 'convictional health' of parties is of vital concern for our entire parliamentary democracy. As an ancient prophet warned another nation in crisis, 'where there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18 AV). We hope that these essays stimulate new thinking about the urgent need for, and the desirable contents of, new political visions shaped by a primary Christian identity and biblical worldview. We hope too that they will offer food for the journey for those already working within British political parties, and inspire others to consider entering the party political fray themselves as a constructive, honourable and missional arena of authentic Christian citizenship – for the common good of the whole nation.

The Christian groups within the three main parties have, in the last few years, led the way in this endeavour. Each has played crucial roles in the production of these essays and their successful launch at fringe events at the respective party conferences in Autumn 2010. All those involved in the Partisan project express their thanks to these organisations.

**Buy these short, 90-page essays or download them for free at:** [www.susa.info/resources/partisan](http://www.susa.info/resources/partisan)

## **For further reading**

- Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds., *God and Government*, SPCK, 2009
- Detailed bibliographies given at the end of each of the essays
- Resources on KLICE's website [www.klice.co.uk](http://www.klice.co.uk)
- Resources on the Bible Society's SUSAs website [www.susa.info](http://www.susa.info)

## **Useful websites – join a Christian group within a political party**

- [www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/home](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/home) Christians in Politics
- [www.thecsm.org.uk](http://www.thecsm.org.uk) Christian Socialist Movement (CSM)
- [www.ccfwebsite.com](http://www.ccfwebsite.com) Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF)
- [www.ldcf.net](http://www.ldcf.net) Liberal Democrat Christian Forum (LDCF)

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