



POLITICS AND FAITH

The awakening of the religious in politics?

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British politicians, Alistair Campbell famously informed us, 'do not do God'. At this election time a related question ought to be asked: 'Do the religious do politics?' The answer, it seems, is that they do and increasingly so – something that ought to give the political parties pause for thought. Particular interest ought to be focused on that substantial sector that I belong to – the Evangelicals. In the UK Evangelicals tend to be the worst publicists for themselves (humility may be a great virtue but it's a lousy basis for PR) and their growth here has been largely overlooked. Yet according to the Evangelical Alliance there may be around 2 million Evangelicals in the UK and they represent the only segment of the British church that is growing. Indeed, on current trends it will not be long before almost all of British Christianity outside Catholicism (and possibly within it) will have some sort of evangelical hue. And now, despite being traditionally cautious of politics, Evangelicals are taking a serious interest in the polls.

British Evangelicals are widely misunderstood; this is in part due to that disdain for PR and the fact that the media find them generally rather uninteresting. If they are commented on, Evangelicals here are often confused with evangelists or with the very different American version, with all its overtones of right-wing politics and fundamentalism. In all fairness, getting a handle on the British evangelical movement is not easy; it represents a series of interwoven strands rather than a single monolithic body and Evangelicals transcend traditional denominational boundaries. For instance, I am happy to be an Anglican Evangelical but I work with those who are Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and of no known affiliation. Although there are common key beliefs – most notably the importance of the Bible and the need for conversion – and a universal focus on Jesus Christ and his death on the cross, these are expressed in a range of worship styles, attitudes and church structures. Equally, evangelicalism cuts across ethnic boundaries, including within it substantial elements of the Black, South Asian and Chinese communities and even more than a few, like myself, from a Greek Cypriot background. In the political context, some other key evangelical traits are worth noting: they have youth, energy and confidence. It is typical of Evangelicals that at a time when many churches are closing buildings, they are more concerned with opening new buildings and training new leaders.

Yet as far as politics goes, the importance of Evangelicals does not simply lie in the fact that they are numerous, varied and lively. Evangelicals trace their roots back at least half a millennium to the Reformers and include in their ancestry the Puritans, the Wesleys, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and many others. This sense of a past history is vital; Evangelicals view themselves as the custodians of historic Christianity. Indeed, they can be seen (and widely see themselves) as the flag-bearers or front-line troops of Christianity in Britain. What Evangelicals hold firmly as a matter of dogma (we take creeds seriously) many other Christians would believe but with less certainty. So Evangelicals are important and when they start to look at politics, it is well worth asking why and listening to what they have to say.

Significantly, despite a long and honourable history of social involvement, Evangelicals have not until recently been much bothered about political matters. This general apathy in this area is partly because Evangelicals tend to be quiet, inward-looking people, more preoccupied with their own relationship with God than with the state of the world. Another significant factor is that, until recently, there was an unthinking assumption among Evangelicals that Britain's Christian roots were so deep and extensive that whatever party came to power would be at least broadly tolerant of cultural Christianity. Politicians were largely irrelevant.

As someone who travels widely within the UK I sense that this longstanding indifference towards politics is now changing. One reason is the almost perverse fact that as the spiritual void in British society deepens and darkens, the Evangelical community has a growing self-confidence. Despite the protestations of a few animated atheists, it is now acceptable to have a belief or faith; the only real question is what kind of faith to have. The second – and perhaps more important reason – is that there has been a gradual loss of that comforting view that politicians were fundamentally irrelevant. Indeed, there is now a troubled awareness that a new government could, for the first time, make the lives of those who hold to historic Christianity extremely difficult. We have seen rulings –and proposed rulings – on prayer in hospitals and schools, on civil partnership ceremonies in churches, and on faith schools, which, if formalised into law, would make at least some of what all churches do illegal. This unease is heightened by evangelicalism's links to the past; there is a widespread feeling that much of what is (or was) good in British society (its once much-envied stability, tolerance and decency) came from evangelical Protestantism. Such views should not be lightly dismissed; such fundamental democratic values as the universality of the rule of law, the value of all individuals and the right to free speech were either first promoted or widely supported by those whose faith like ours was Bible-based. Yet as Evangelicals survey the British scene today there is a sense of dismay and foreboding as they see what they consider to be their culture changed, and not for the better.

Evangelicals then are both important and concerned. But what do they want? I would suggest that two things are important. The first quite simply is comprehension. British Evangelicals would feel happier if those who aspire to lead would at least go to the trouble of trying to understand who we are. One example is the way that the media habitually confuses an Evangelical and an evangelist. (For the record, an Evangelical is a Christian whose faith focuses on the Bible and Christ; an evangelist is someone who seeks to proclaim such a faith: I am happy to be both.) Another example is the way in which it is widely assumed that Evangelicals and fundamentalists are the same thing, when there are profound differences both in the nature and practice of their beliefs. So it should not really be necessary for me to write here that while all Christians believe in creation, the vast majority of British Christians (whether Evangelical or not) would see at least some measure of symbolism in the first few chapters of Genesis. Another example is the assumption that we are some sort of imported American novelty. One of evangelicalism's hero figures, Thomas Cranmer, whose prayer book for the Church of England still exerts a great influence among the faithful, was born three years before Columbus set sail for America. And if we would like comprehension of the facts about us we also want people to understand why we believe what we believe. So, for instance, the evangelical attitude towards homosexuality is not because we are fixated on difficult laws in the Old Testament. Rather it is because in the second chapter of Genesis and in a later reiteration by Jesus in the Gospels we read that God created humanity male and female and instituted marriage between them; we do not see the gender roles as being interchangeable.

But comprehension is not enough, we would like consideration. Here we come across one major difference from our American counterparts; British Evangelicals have no aspirations for political power. Strange as it may seem, we do not want

to be either kings or king-makers. This may be because of the more nuanced form of British Christianity, which recognises that the world is a difficult place and that there are sometimes rather grey issues that are not resolvable in black and white. It may also be a distant memory of the failure of the Puritans and the catastrophe of the English Civil War. But we do want to be recognised for who we are and we wouldn't mind being listened to. In part, this desire to be consulted is self-interest. But there is something else: we Evangelicals are indissolubly linked to community and we feel a duty to those at the bottom of the social ladder. And we are painfully aware that today those at the bottom are not doing very well at all. Indeed, many Evangelical church leaders, whether they call themselves vicars, pastors or ministers, feel exasperated at what is said by political leaders securely cocooned in council offices or Westminster. We know what's really happening and we wouldn't mind if somebody listened.

Here the powerful sense of cultural history that runs through evangelicalism gives its adherents, whatever their ethnic background, a sense of being guardians of what it is to be a decent society. Evangelicals have strong and thought-through views on culture and society. Let me list some grievances. We universally lament the rise in house prices, which, by forcing both partners to work, has put pressure on marriage and families. Even before the present financial crisis we were unhappy about a culture that had come to elevate the movers of paper above those who actually made things. We are angry (and ours is a righteous anger) when we see the poor suffering because they cannot afford proper health care, dentistry or decent schools. We are irritated by a culture that has come to glorify sportsmen and media celebrities rather than those who work tirelessly to benefit the welfare of others. We are baffled and saddened by a national ethos that elevates the banal and the trivial over the worthwhile and the lasting. We are exasperated by a political culture that wants to see the results of faith but doesn't care for faith; as if fruit can be produced without a fruit tree. We are aggrieved by the way that almost everything is now apparently controlled by shareholders for shareholders. We are sick of spin, of empty words and of manipulated statistics. Perhaps, above all, we find ourselves infuriated at the way in which, with morality sidelined, politics has become dominated by nothing nobler than a seedy, short-term pragmatism.

Yet we want consideration not simply to air grievances. We may be frustrated but we are not ultimately cynics. After all, a central Christian belief is a firm and certain hope that the future belongs to God. While we believe in sin we also believe in grace. We are under no illusion that politics is going to bring about the Kingdom of God. We do not expect the creation of the 'New Jerusalem' but we would like the abuses of 'Babylon' to be restrained. We have ideas and suggestions to share, based not on political ideology but on working with real people in the real world.

No doubt you will want me to say who Evangelicals will vote for. Here I make no predictions; British evangelicalism's diversity is so great that there can be no block vote. Yet I do know that even with a low poll, Christians will vote; we treat politics seriously now. The fact is there is much in all three parties to attract us. We admire Labour's commitment (at least in theory) to social justice, we respect the Conservatives' appreciation of the rights of individuals and we find the Liberal Democrats' defence of personal freedom engaging. Yet there is also much that troubles us about all three: Labour's refusal to apologise over its mishandling of the economy, the Conservatives' evident social elitism and the worrying illiberality of the Liberal Democrats. In short, I do not know how Evangelicals will affect this election; but I have little doubt they will play a major role. Yet I am confident of this: the time is not far off when their role in politics will be critical.