Renewal

Faith and politics – conflict, confusion, and cooperation

Stephen Beer

January 2007

As I write, hundreds of fellow citizens are plotting to kill me. So might George Orwell have begun '*England Your England*' if he was writing in the Britain of 2007 rather than during the Blitz (Orwell, 1941)[1]. According to comments from security service reports there are around 200 potential terrorist plots by Islam aligned fundamentalists, which are being tracked (Observer, 2007). Faith appears to be the source of much violence, discord and anxiety. As in 1941, we are asking what sort of society we want to defend[2].

Faith and politics appear to be in conflict and the political world is often caught out by new controversies, such as a play, a TV show or a uniform policy, which stimulate protests by a faith group. Some observers are pessimistic, bemoaning the fragmentation of our society into numerous groups driven by conflicting worldviews. Some are strident, declaring that one more heave of atheism will push religion into a private box away from public life. Others look for an apparent utopia in which we have found a common ethic by which to live and have buried our differences (Küng, 1997).

What is certain is that most now realise that religion cannot be ignored. As former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright records:

> Diplomats in my era were taught not to invite trouble, and no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion.

At first regarding religion-influenced conflict as reflecting old world views, she concedes

> I have come to realise that it may have been I who was stuck in an earlier time. (Albright, 2006)

There can be robust progressive responses to the faith and politics dilemmas we face today. They focus around the principles of freedom and equality, an improved style of politics, and a warm embrace of practical action. There are challenges for faith groups but for British politicians too. Ultimately we have to improve our polity. Nevertheless, if we do not get this issue right we will have sown seeds for years of social discord.

Some recent controversies

Headscarves and veils

The right to wear a hijab has been conceded in many cases. This applies to other forms of religious dress too, where they do not interfere with the wearer's ability to carry out his or her work. In France, controversy over school girls demanding to wear hijabs to school led to the passing of a law prohibiting the wearing of overt outward forms of expression of any religion; a contrast with the more pragmatic British approach, though which has only delayed discussion of the issues raised. Confrontation did arise however in the case of Aishah Azmi, a teaching assistant at a Church of England school in Dewsbury, over the wearing of the niqab. A tribunal in Autumn 2006 found she had not been discriminated against on religious grounds, though she had not been properly treated.

The veil issue was raised for debate by the Leader of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Jack Straw MP. Writing in the Lancashire Telegraph, and in later comments, Mr Straw noted that he asks women wearing a veil when arriving for a consultation at his constituency surgery to remove it so that he can see clearly to whom he is talking. He maintained he had heard no dissent when this question was asked. He further suggested that the wearing of the veil was 'a visible statement of separation and difference' (Straw, 2006).

Crosses

At around the same time, the case of Nadia Eweida received publicity. She was required by British Airways to cease wearing a small cross around her neck with her uniform. British Airways stated that this was due to a universal uniform policy. However, that same policy permitted the wearing of headscarves or turbans as recognised symbols of religious expression. The airline found itself in the odd position of ruling out a form of religious expression linked to the majority faith of its home country. The Church of England expressed regret at the uniform policy, particularly through comments made by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of London. Other Christian faith organisations also voiced concern and there have been hints of a compromise.

Sexual orientation rights

An attempt in the House of Lords to overturn Sexual Orientation Regulations that had been applied in Northern Ireland at the beginning of 2007, in advance of UK-wide implementation of a similar set of rules later in the year, failed despite the hopes of hundreds of protesters outside Parliament. The rules prevent businesses from discriminating against homosexuals and are an extension of the Equalities Act but some Christians believe they will force them to act in ways contrary to their religious beliefs.

Exeter University Christian Union sought a judicial review to attempt to overturn suspension by the university students' guild. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, submitted written evidence to the High Court supporting the Christian Union's claims.

Rights colliding

These examples highlight areas where perceived rights have clashed. Increased awareness of people from different religious groups has led to some confusion when the status quo is challenged by such adherents (eg veils). Meanwhile, the state or its proxy has been making attempts to extend rights and again this has potentially come up against existing practice even where discrimination has not been intended. To a great extent, some of the recent disputes are being resolved as in any other case where rights appear to clash, though amidst hysteria outside the courtroom.

Members of religious groups will tend to be engaged with the wider world and, in the case of Christianity and Islam which are proselytising religions, are keen to promote faith publicly. Faith is not simply a set of beliefs; for believers it is a way of life. Those of us who spend large parts of our lives in politics may empathise. Therefore any perceived attempts to restrict public religious practice can be seen as limiting previously safeguarded freedoms. The result can be that some are driven to fanatical distortions of their faiths, refusing to accept compromise and at the extreme, resorting to violence.

The concept of universal human rights as we understand it stems from the influence of the Christian faith in Europe since Charlemagne, with the concept of equality before God, including equal rights to act according to conscience (see Siedentop, 2001).

Other examples do suggest a confusion has been generated. Whereas a liberal democracy is built on individual rights, a new concept of 'group rights' is being tacitly accepted with little debate. Under this concept, a group of people is ascribed a label (in this case religious as opposed to racial) which may even be their own, and group members come to be defined by the state primarily by that label. Spokespeople are identified and at times the adoption of lesser rights for individuals within the group is tolerated. An extreme example may be the suggestion that certain localities may be able to have Sharia Law apply, at odds with an inclusive democracy.

Moral direction, national and international

On a broader level, there are underlying tensions based on the moral direction the country appears to be heading to religious eyes. Most faith groups would be united in condemning the current 'trend to porn' in the media, together with the potential for an increase in gambling. The sense that these things are happening with little debate heightens the perception that the country is being transformed without consent. Whatever the truth of this, it is deeply felt. Of course, faiths often call for a return to better morality, politicians often avoid such talk, and there is disagreement about what is actually meant by morality. However, there is some concern here for progressives since we too are looking ahead to a vision of a 'good society' in some form. Christianity and Islam both look beyond borders to worldwide religious communities, though in different forms. Members are therefore informed about international politics and development.

Faith in Britain

We have been accustomed to assuming the UK is a secular country but the evidence is mixed. The 2001 census recorded that 71.7 per cent of the population described itself as Christian, with Islam the next largest faith representing 2.7 per cent. A poll for the Guardian in December 2006 found that 63 per cent described themselves as Christian (Guardian, 2006a). This poll also found that 41 per cent of the population would attend a religious service at least a few times a year, which tallies with the Church of England claim that 43 per cent attend a service on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, a figure which rises to 48 per cent in London (Church of England, 2007). An Ipsos MORI poll found that 18 per cent of those surveyed stated they were practising members of an organised religion and 25 per cent regarded themselves as non-practising members. Only 14 per cent described themselves as atheist and 12 per cent as agnostic. (Ipsos MORI 2003).

Even if it is accepted that those regularly involved with the life of the church are a much smaller proportion, it is still clear that religion plays some part in the way most people look at their lives and that people shy away from describing themselves as atheist. This causes some tension amongst secular commentators who try to explain away these results essentially by ignoring them (eg Guardian, 2006b)

It has been suggested that those adherents who cannot be described as active and know little of the tenets of the faith with which they align are effectively members of a 'folk religion', in this case based on the country's Christian heritage:

What is frequently termed folk religion is a complex phenomenon. It embraces superstition, a basic human religiosity, and forms of experience and expression which are inherently Christian in their presuppositions. It speaks of needs that are deeply rooted in human nature and human society. (Moses, 1995).

This may be both encouraging and challenging for the church. From the point of view of progressives, we must acknowledge that most hold some sort of religious belief, however tenuous, and that to deny this fact is to exclude something significant from public life[3].

Indeed, as Michael Burleigh has illustrated, previous attempts in Europe to do just that have resulted in some sort of state religion arising, complete with religious symbols and rites of passage, where the state becomes God, usually with totalitarian consequences (Burleigh, 2005; Burleigh, 2006).

Equality of choice

The challenge we face is to maintain liberal democracy amidst competing demands from groups in society. While the liberal model of society is one of individual autonomy and voluntary association, as Michael Walzer stresses,

> …in practice many of [society's] associations are unfriendly to autonomy. More than this, many of the groups that coexist in civil society, that seek recognition and empowerment within it, are not themselves liberal or democratic, even though they appeal to liberal and democratic norms (Walzer, 2004).

Walzer's solution is broadly for a strong state to be accountable while promoting a strong civil society. In practice there will have to be many negotiations and compromises as relatively new groups are accommodated, while the state promotes freedom and equality. In any event, neo liberal values are not sufficient for progressives, as Australian Labor Leader Kevin Rudd emphasises:

> …a properly functioning society embraces the interests of both self and other – not just the first, to the absolute exclusion of the second. That is why the progressive values of equity, community and sustainability concern others as much as they do ourselves (Rudd, 2006).

We are interested in healthy and vibrant communities, in collective action and mutual support, and in actual and practical opportunities for all. Our values and actions therefore resonate with church and other faith groups. For this reason, any policy we adopt towards faith in the public square cannot appear as a form of New Labour neo-conservatism that focuses only on individuals.

The bottom line for progressives must be an emphasis on freedom and equality, worked out through compromises in the British tradition, and here there may be a way forward for us when considering faith groups (and fundamentalist atheists of course). We need to have more faith in our liberal democracy while emphasising equality of choice. Any woman can wear a veil or a cross if she is exercising genuine freedom of choice (subject to workplace requirements) and should have the same freedom, in practice as well as in theory, to choose not to do so. Equality of choice is a two-edged sword. For while it upholds certain rights of expression, it requires faith groups to ensure that freedom to choose is upheld and even promoted.

The case of education

Nowhere is this debate more passionately debated than over education and faith schools. England's educational settlement, from the nineteenth century onwards, has always recognised some role for religious teaching or ethos in schools. The clearest example is the church schools. Now we are seeing new faith schools established. There is no doubt places are much sought after, even amongst inactive adherents. In some way (aside from claims of implicit selection) they do offer an attractive educational environment.

In theory, there is a place for the new faith schools as long as liberal democratic values and skills are taught and promoted clearly. While we may not mind if a child in a religious community remains a member all his or her life, it is important that the child becomes a fully equipped citizen. He or she must be able to make choices and to do so requires skills of inquiry and discernment, which must be taught. On this basis, we may have serious doubts about new faith schools. While the established schools operated as a result of a British settlement of some sort, sensitive to and part of mainstream society, the new schools may be somewhat adrift (whatever the religious ethos). A better aim, since the next generation will be tackling faith issues, is to ensure all state schools teach about religion clearly, promoting inquiry and discernment within an attractive educational ethos while avoiding atheist agendas.

Assurance in debate

Practical politics requires something further. We have all sat in committee meetings that have been poorly or indulgently chaired. Aside from hours of potential wasted, the worst such examples see committee members clamour for their views to be heard and followed, hoping through force of expression to push the chair towards their position, often succeeding. Some chairs will over-react, clamping down on debate, ruling certain opinions out of order and imposing their own solutions to the issues under discussion. This can create resentment and discord if there are clear disagreements. The correct approach is to ensure all voices are heard, subject to norms of debate, and to guide as many as possible to arriving at a common and legitimate understanding. The 'public square' is one enormous committee meeting. The problem is that it is not being properly chaired.

Like a chair who does not know his or her standing orders, so when engaging with faith groups, the state often seems unsure of itself and the rules of engagement. Politicians and officials use warm words but few have taken time to understand the language of faith. The result is clamour. We have a strong democracy, with a rich heritage. It is something that we love about this country. We need to demonstrate more assurance as we debate, open to being enriched through the process. For example,

> A Christian perspective on contemporary policy debates may not prevail. It must nonetheless be argued. And once heard, it must be weighed, together with other arguments from different philosophical traditions, in a fully contestable secular polity. A Christian perspective, informed by a social gospel or Christian Socialist tradition, should not be rejected contemptuously by secular politicians as if these views are an unwelcome intrusion into the political sphere. If the churches are barred from participating in the great debates about the values that ultimately underpin our society, our economy and our polity, then we have reached a very strange place indeed (Rudd, 2006).

At the same time, consultations must be genuine and extra time must be taken to demonstrate that government understands concerns and is not engaged in a subversive attack on belief.

Legacy and Establishment

An aggressive promotion of a 'pure' secular state does not go with the grain of history. An interesting case is that of the establishment of the Church of England. It is difficult to defend from a purely secular point of view and disestablishment is prescribed as the remedy. A multi-faith coronation is often suggested as appropriate for the twenty first century (eg Katwala, 2005). The problem is that the very act of disestablishment, without any counter-balancing assurance, sends an anti-faith message at a very sensitive time in addition to being at odds with our implicit 'folk religion'. A multi-faith coronation is likely to disappoint everybody who cares about such things since faiths do have conflicting truth claims. It is similar to the re-branding of Christmas lights as 'winter lights' from fear of causing offence where none is taken. It would also change the nature of the coronation from a Christian service in which the sovereign is viewed as a servant of God, to a ceremony in which representatives of faith groups effectively pay homage to the head of state. There is of course a rumbling debate within the Church of England on whether it actually *wants* to remain established, recognising as it does the compromises this involves.

Common goals and common activity

Ultimately, aside from the extreme and the disturbed, people trust each other more and get along better when they actually know each other and work together. That does not mean we should promote more inter-faith dialogue: I have spent hours in church inter-denominational meetings discussing differences but found progress was made when people worked together on a common aim, such as a campaign of some sort. Differences are then tackled as they arise. In the same way, interaction and working together need to be encouraged across communities and faith groups. This is another argument against more faith schools. It is more than that. The great social justice goals we share across society offer great opportunities to refresh the 'progressive consensus' which in various forms is working against social exclusion and poverty in a form of public morality.

The Left can seem awkward in approaching this issue because it has long ignored the role faith has played in its history[4]. The Labour Party has been strongly influenced in its history by people determined to put their faith into practice.

There is a Church of England church in each local community and usually other churches too. While they may not always be well attended, they usually attract many more people than to a political meeting. Church members care deeply about their local communities and are highly active within them. Leaders will usually

live in the area, near the church. Church and other faith groups are increasingly seeking funding to deliver local services. There have been clashes as some local councils are extremely suspicious of religious organisations despite government policy. On a wider and more public scale, the Christian community was prominent in the organisation and support for the MakePovertyHistory campaign in 2005 which saw 250,000 demonstrate in Edinburgh for the G8 summit in June that year. It is clear that 'Religious communities are among the increasingly few places that bring people together as citizens rather than as consumers – fighting for a living wage and against poverty' (Lawson, 2007).

This ought to tie in with our aim of an enabling state encouraging more local activity. It also means people need incentives to spend time on such activities, perhaps through the tax system.

Change, continuity, and hope

The increasing prevalence of faith in public life has created tensions. At the same time, a terrorist threat is aimed directly at our way of life and this has prompted further anxiety about the role of faith groups. However, many if not most, members of faith groups share at least some of our progressive values. The challenge is to affirm liberal democracy while emphasising those values we have in common, not through endless discussion but by putting them into practice. Political debate needs to include faith perspectives while faith groups themselves need to follow the rules of debate. Our responses to these challenges can transform and refresh British secular liberal democracy. We can affirm with Orwell that 'England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same.' (Orwell, 1941).

Stephen Beer is Vice Chair of the Christian Socialist Movement, a socialist society affiliated to the Labour Party. He is also Chair of Vauxhall CLP. www.stephenbeer.com .

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[1] Orwell's opening sentence was 'As I write, perfectly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.'

[2] In an earlier piece for Renewal I outlined why Labour should be more positive towards faith groups, especially given its heritage (Beer, 2006). This paper looks at the challenges we face.

[3] Sir Winston Churchill understood this: he appeared to hold to a 'folk' version of Christianity and this was evident in his speeches.

[4] A useful survey can be found in Dale, 2000.