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### **PUBLIC FAITH AND LEADERSHIP**

By David Phillips

In November the BBC website hosted an article under the title “Blair feared faith ‘nutter’ label”. The headline invites all manner of witty responses but in the interests of giving respect to those in authority these are left to the readers own imagination. What this headline points to is the problems that Christians, and those of other clear religious convictions, have when seeking to serve in public office. Whether Tony Blair, who managed to do so much to undermine Biblical standards is genuinely a Christian is not the issue but rather that he appears to have felt inhibited from living out or expressing his faith in public. A similar issue arose recently with the announcement that Joel Edwards, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance, was to become a commissioner to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). There was a lot of strong comment about this because he holds strong religious convictions which direct his views on certain issues, principally homosexual practice.

The BBC article was promoting their programme ‘The Blair Years’ and they drew attention to the anomaly between Mr Blair asserting that faith was “hugely important” to his premiership and the famous quote of his chief spin-doctor Alastair Campbell that ‘we don’t do God’. How could this anomaly arise? The programme and article seem to lead to the conclusion that it was because spin came first and faith second. Both Blair and Campbell were so concerned about how the public would react to his faith they felt it had to be kept under wraps.

It is easy to be critical of this attitude not least at the end of a year in which we have remembered the accomplishments of William Wilberforce whose faith was most definitely public and drove him to fight social ills including the slave trade. But our nation has changed and it may be that if Wilberforce were campaigning today he would not be welcomed. The Blair years have made all this worse, indeed it is astonishing that Tony Blair could be so blind to the damage he was doing to people of faith, especially those trying to live out their faith in public office. However, he cannot be blamed for it all because it was clearly already a factor when he took office.

What Blair ran up against is the pressure of secularism (see also *Cross†Way* Issue 101 - Summer 2006). Secularism is the desire to remove religion from the public arena and education. Clearly secularism requires that those in public office, including Prime Ministers, should keep their faith to themselves neither making overt displays of statements about faith publicly nor allowing faith to shape their policies. This is not the same as Secular Humanism which is the desire to eradicate religion altogether as being both backwards and harmful.

The greatest pressure for secularism seems to come from government, education and the media. Blair and Campbell clearly believed that the secular mindset is dominant in Britain, otherwise they would have been fearful of losing votes. However, it is a moot point whether that is really how British people think. It is more likely that it is how the media think and politicians know that if the media bang on about something for long enough people start believing it. The question in this as in other areas is whether the media is shaped by public opinion or whether it shapes it.

Whatever the reasoning the Blair team were concerned about how people would respond. But why is this an issue?

#### **What’s wrong with faith in public?**

First, of course, is the simple fact that secularists do not want others to express their faith in public.

The very idea that a Prime Minister should think it appropriate to do so is against their creed so they are bound to oppose it.

Secondly, Alastair Campbell apparently said of the UK electorate that they are ‘a bit wary of politicians who go on about God’. This seems to be true and may be a purely cultural thing. American sportsmen for example seem quite content to speak about their faith in public but a British sportsman who does so becomes a bit of a curiosity. Since the search for a manager for England is topical it is as well to remember what happened to Glenn Hoddle. There was dissatisfaction with his ability but what tipped the balance in the media was of all things his religious beliefs even though these did not seem very different to classical Hindu belief. This reticence about public displays of religion does appear to be in part a British problem. The author Ronald Blythe commented that “As for the British Churchman, he goes to Church as he goes to the bathroom, with the minimum of fuss and no explanation if he can help it.” Peter Mandelson said of Tony Blair that he is ‘not an exhibitionist when it comes to religion but deep inside him it is very, very important’.

This seems to be part of the problem. British people do distrust those who make too much of their religion. The clergy are acceptable, just, but it is best if they come across as bumbling buffoons (we tolerated a Prime Minister’s husband on the same basis). It is probably for the same reason that the early Methodists were called ‘enthusiasts’ and I was recently at a Diocesan meeting where someone claimed that the members of a lively and growing church were too enthusiastic about their religion. Therefore, it may be partly a cultural issue, but by no means solely.

### **Listening to God**

People are also afraid of leaders who claim religious legitimation for their actions and worse still where such people believe, or at least claim, that God has told them to do something. It has to be granted that this fear is not without substance. There are, and have been, leaders who claim such divine authority when it seems clear to others and posterity that they were deluded or deceitful.

The former Tory MP Michael Portillo wrote about this in the Sunday Times earlier in the year saying “I worry because men of power who take instruction from unseen forces are essentially fanatics”. The article was ostensibly a warning to David Cameron not to appear too religious. The main evidence Portillo gives is the fact that under Queen Mary more than 300 Protestants were martyred (though Mary was not a “man” of power of course). However, it seems rather unfair to blame Mary entirely. She was hardly alone in wanting the Protestants dead and the papacy in particular encouraged it. Indeed since the papacy could be said to be the unseen force perhaps Mr Portillo would agree that it is unhelpful to have a Prime Minister who is also a Roman Catholic! But the main point he wants to make is that Mary was a religious fanatic whereas her sister Elizabeth was altogether more balanced. He goes on to claim that it is the religious moderation of the Elizabethan settlement together with the weakness and ineffectiveness of the Church of England that has saved us from religious fanatics becoming men of power. This again raises the question whether Portillo would tolerate someone like William Wilberforce as leader. But it is also rather too selective because after the time of Elizabeth came Oliver Cromwell who was very clear in his religious convictions. What emerged from the long struggle was a situation in which we no longer trust an individual with too much power but rather we have a parliamentary democracy intended to provide checks and balances.

We have still not got to the heart of the problem. We may rightly criticise Mary for putting to death 300 Protestants but if we are to blame it on her being a religious fanatic how do we account for the slaughter wreaked by purely secular leaders such as Stalin, Mao, Hitler and Pol Pot? Indeed, if recent history is a guide, the absence of religious belief is far more likely to lead to fanaticism and when a political system provides no checks and balances the consequences are dreadful.

Therefore, whatever Michael Portillo or others may think it is not religious belief that is the problem. All people who serve in public office wish to shape public policy according to their own inner convictions. That is true of politicians of all parties. (The only exception are those whose sole purpose is self-promotion and gain who are even more to be feared!) People of faith are no exception to this and the fundamental problem is simply that secularists do not like the views of religious people.

In order to avoid political bias I will finish with a quotation from Sir Menzies Campbell one of a growing number of recent former leaders of the Liberal Democrats. In the BBC article mentioned at the start Sir Ming is reported as saying the public would have been less keen to elect Mr Blair if “they’d known the extent to which ethical values would overshadow pragmatism”. There is clearly a background to this statement which is not clear from the article but taking it at face value it is extraordinary. Firstly he fails to comprehend that pragmatism is itself an ethical value. Secondly, and more importantly because it exposes a nightmare future if people really do believe this. It is pragmatism, devoid of any other ethical values, which argues for the killing of unwanted unborn children. It is pragmatism which permits a person to choose when to take their own life. But it is also pragmatism that says when people get older and are no longer useful then they need no longer live, or that children in the womb with disabilities, or born with such disabilities, are of no practical benefit. This is not scaremongering. Some of these things are currently the policy of mainstream political parties and in the ancient world most of them were both legal and practiced. What stopped things like the exposure of children and abortion was the spread of Christian ethical values which first made them unacceptable and then made them illegal.

For all the arguments the real reason people object to leaders being shaped by their faith is because they disagree with the fundamental convictions leaders hold. If we allow this to go unchallenged, then it will become harder and harder for people of real faith, whatever that faith, to hold public office.

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