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Churchman

EDITORIAL I

Once upon a time, the Church of England was known as ‘the Tory party at prayer’. In the eighteenth century, it was generally assumed that Tories supported the establishment, of which the Church was the most obvious, widespread and venerable manifestation, and that the Whigs were dangerous liberals, out to destroy the link between the crown and the mitre which had been established in the sixteenth century and so dearly fought for in the seventeenth.

By the nineteenth century however, this traditional picture was no longer quite so valid, although it was still possible for the religiously eccentric Benjamin Disraeli to appeal to Anglican voters over against the devoutly high church Gladstone, and to do so with some success. Since that time, the lines have become much more blurred, but it is probably still true that churchgoers tend to be middle class and to vote Conservative, rather than Labour or Liberal Democrat. There are undoubtedly thousands of individual exceptions to this ‘rule’, but broadly speaking, it does seem to contain a grain of truth – at least in southern England.

Recently, the Tory party has shown signs of returning to prayer, and the question of religious involvement in secular affairs has once again become an issue in British politics. The main inspiration for this is undoubtedly American, and has remarkably little to do with early stages in our own history. For some time now, it has been almost impossible to stand for high office in the United States without professing some kind of religious belief, often of a conservative evangelical kind. There is a solid constituency of American voters which wants its candidates to advocate such things as legalising prayer in state schools, and criminalising abortion in most circumstances. In alliance with other (non-religious) conservatives, these people have now succeeded in putting their own candidate in the White House, and the Republican Party which he represents has a ‘Christian’ wing which does not hesitate to proclaim its decidedly right-wing views.

British observers need to understand what this phenomenon represents, before trying to decide whether, or to what extent, it can be replicated over here. First of all, we must remember that the United States is the world’s oldest officially secular society. Secularism is written into the first amendment of the constitution, despite (or because of) the fact that a very large

proportion of the American population was, and still is, deeply religious. Conflict has intensified in recent years, and as an aggressive secularist lobby, which represents only a tiny minority of the population, has used the constitutional separation of church and state as a basis for removing any expression of Christianity from American public life. Some of this (like the ban on Christmas mangers outside town halls) is petty and silly, but it has serious implications in two areas – education and the right to life.

Americans who want their children to have a religious education have to pay for it themselves, on top of what they are already paying for a non-religious state school system. This is clearly unfair, and virtually guarantees that no one from a poor background is likely to get a religious education at school. Churches and parents are right to protest against this, and the Christian coalition, as it is called, derives a lot of its sympathy and support from this issue. But the right to life, which is essentially an anti-abortion crusade (though it would include euthanasia as well), is a more complex issue, because it takes the opposite attitude towards personal freedom. Parents are financially penalised if they exercise their freedom to choose in educational matters, and this is rightly seen as discrimination against them. But with an abortion on demand policy, no woman is forced either to have a child she does not want, or to get rid of one she wants to keep. In this sphere, the pro-life campaigners appear to be imposing restrictions on a woman's personal freedom, and therefore they have less support for their views. There is also the fact that pro-lifers differ among themselves about what restrictions should be imposed, and any law on the subject would be extremely difficult to enforce. Add all this up, and it appears that the Christian coalition will lose this campaign, however much some politicians may bend it its direction at election time.

Transfer this scenario to the United Kingdom, and what have you got? The religious education situation is very different in Britain, and whatever its inadequacies may be, there is little prospect of any political movement being formed to fight for more of it. This leaves the abortion/euthanasia issue as the major potential vote-getter, but the problems here are identical to the ones which the Americans face. Outlawing abortion is simply not a practical possibility, though it would certainly be good to see family planning clinics and the like doing their utmost to reduce its occurrence. But the best way to do this is to change the climate of public opinion, not to pass draconian legislation, and there is some evidence that this is starting to happen. More

and more, even convinced feminists and libertarians are saying publicly that they are not personally in favour of abortion (certainly not 'on demand'), although they still think that ultimately it is a woman's right to choose. This situation may not be ideal, but it seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and abortion will not become a party political issue in this country.

So what is Christian Conservatism all about? If it is an attempt to clean up politics on the basis of traditional Christian morality, it is hard to see how anyone could be against it. The language and behaviour of some of our leading public figures could certainly do with a good scrubbing, but this applies equally to all parties, not just to the Conservatives. On the other hand, it may be an attempt to demonstrate that there is some innate link between Conservative policies and Christian values. Once again, there is no reason to object to this, as long as it is admitted that Christian values are much bigger than any partisan policy option. In other words, Conservative programmes may be framed from, and within, a Christian world-view, but it cannot be deduced from that that a Christian outlook on life excludes other political options.

Unfortunately, exclusion of the others is a normal part of party politics. Those who listen to politicians soon realise that they cannot open their mouths without attacking the other side, and all too often attacks of this kind are used to hide the absence of any serious alternative to what they are condemning. Neither the Christian faith nor the Church of England as an institution can get mixed up in that kind of thing. Christians can, and should, belong to all the major political parties, and contribute Christian insights to them. But they have to remember that there will be times when it will be necessary to break rank with their own party, in defence of a Christian principle which is being attacked. In British politics this can be done without penalty by the use of the so-called 'free vote', and Christians in politics might find that their best option is to work for the extension of that principle to a wider range of issues than it is at present.

Those of us who are not politicians ought to keep our options as open as possible. The secret ballot guarantees this at the polling station, of course, but we ought to go much further than that. We should be ready to examine each party's platform with a dispassionate eye, to see whether it strays from the path of biblical teaching. We should take an interest in the character and

views of our local constituency candidates, making it plain that we expect a high standard of ethical and professional conduct from them, whether they claim to be Christians or not. Above all, we should be prepared to vote with our feet when necessary, and change party affiliation if and when it becomes plain that the interests of the Gospel demand it.

There are some political parties which no Christian can in good conscience support – the National Front, for example, or Sinn Féin. This is because these parties advocate or tolerate behaviour and attitudes which are incompatible with the gospel of peace and brotherly love. Fortunately, none of the major parties falls into that category, and there are many hot political issues on which there is no obviously ‘Christian’ view. Nobody can say that foxhunting, for example, is or is not biblical, and we must expect to find believers on both sides of that argument. Similarly, it is not more or less ‘Christian’ to support or oppose a single European currency, and here again there will be believers on both sides. Those who attempt to link their Christian faith to nationalist policies – whether English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish – must be viewed with the utmost suspicion, since the line between legitimate national pride and illegitimate national chauvinism is not always clear. We may be glad of our nation’s Christian heritage, but for the Church of England to become a nationalist (‘patriotic’) organisation would be a betrayal of Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek.

Ultimately, the relationship between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world must be determined by the competing claims of time and eternity. We live in the world of time, and are responsible for our conduct in it. But we are ambassadors of eternity, enjoying, even now, the first fruits of everlasting life. Because of this, we can never become so attached to the thoughts and behaviour of this world that we lose sight of the claims of the next. In the end, it does not really matter who wins the next general election here on earth – what counts is who are the elect in the sight of God. Christians who keep that in mind can do their political parties the inestimably good turn of reminding them of their own relativity, and must do all in their power to keep politics firmly in its place as a temporal (and therefore also temporary) expedient, not as a message of salvation which belongs only to the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ.