



Editorial



Paul Woolley

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What do Donald Trump, Podemos (the Spanish political party), Geert Wilders (the Dutch politician), Jaroslaw Kaczynski (the Polish politician), Evo Morales (Bolivia’s president), Rodrigo Duterte (the Philippine’s president), the Brexit vote and Labour’s Jeremy Corybn have in common? No, that’s not the start of an overly-complex joke; it’s a serious question.

Welcome to our latest edition of *The Bible in Transmision* exploring the rise of populism. I hope that you enjoy the diverse range of articles that we have prepared for you. We live in interesting times and, like the men of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12.32, we need to understand these times in order to work out a faithful response.

The challenge of engaging with a subject like populism starts with defining what the word actually means. In his excellent article on Christian populism, Nick Spencer notes that there is little that unites populism. Indeed, as *The Economist* explained last December, ‘Populists may be militarists, pacifists, admirers of Che Guevara or Ayn Rand; they may be tree-hugging pipeline opponents or drill-baby-drill climate-change deniers.’ Thankfully, populism appears to have some common characteristics, and we have drawn on some thoughtful contributors to help navigate us through the phenomenon.

In case we risk becoming overly parochial, Julia Bicknell looks at democracy, the media and developing countries. Drawing on her extensive personal experience as a broadcast journalist, Bicknell highlights some examples from around

the world where the media has had a positive impact and helped improve people’s lives. Noting that the BBC’s Mission is ‘To act in the public interest, serving all audiences’, Bicknell reminds us that the media has an important role to protect human freedom, including the freedom to disagree. The media should never contribute to the tyranny of the majority.

Phil Anderson offers a biblical critique of the new populism. Anderson illustrates the way that populism transcends the ideology of left and right and explores how Christians can live out the twin callings to the world of politics and government (to be salt and light in the world, and to pray) in our own generation.

Similarly, in his article entitled ‘Keep calm and carry on’, Dave Landrum cautions against responding to the contemporary political situation with fear. We should not try and ignore what’s happening, he exhorts, but pray for those in political authority and for good government. We should also be active and involved citizens.

As our culture war heightens, Landrum encourages us to avoid the two political extremes of either domination or victimhood. On the one hand, we should remember that nationalism nearly always ends in tears. On the other hand, we should resist being drawn into the divisive misery of identity politics. It’s from this identity, he argues, that we can more fruitfully engage as public leaders who serve our communities, by acting in a different spirit and casting a better vision.

John Coffey provides a helpful historical contribution. Coffey examines the role of the Levellers and the Bible in the English Revolution. It was, he argues, a populist, religious milieu that produced 'the Levellers'. Celebrated by Jeremy Corbyn and Daniel Hannan MEP alike, they represent a distinctly Christian tradition of political protest who read the Bible politically, as a book with a coherent message about power and its abuse. Coffey concludes with a sobering thought: 'If the Levellers can help us appreciate the religious sources of modern democracy, they might also help us to think about its uncertain future.'

One thing that could help us in the face of uncertainty is Catholic Social Teaching (CST). In her article, Amy Daughton argues that this theological resource could help us respond to populism with CST. Whilst CST might help us respond to the reality of populist divisions, Daughton suggests that CST can actually outflank populism in speaking about 'the people' – us – far more than populism achieves.

In his exploration of populism in its American context, specifically in the aftermath of the American Civil War, David Koyzis helps bring everything together with his piece on populism in Christian perspective. The story of James G Weaver and the People's Party at the end of the nineteenth century has distinct echoes of Donald Trump, even if Weaver's populism turned out to be insufficiently popular to win the election. Koyzis concludes by drawing on some theological and Greek philosophical resources to suggest an appropriate response to all of this and how we might see public justice done.

Nick Spencer observes how Christianity can be an immensely powerful tool for populist politicians, parties and, occasionally, governments, before noting wryly that Christian populism's biggest problem could be Pope Francis. Amy Daughton

would no doubt agree. In the final analysis (and possibly irony), to quote Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy, 'most populists tend to be secular themselves'.

The question underlying all of these contributions and recent events is whether populism is a positive or negative phenomenon and whether it contributes to human flourishing or not. The balance of the articles suggests that, whilst populism is purportedly concerned with championing the interests of 'ordinary people', it often appeals to the worst instincts of human nature and fails to deliver justice. If this analysis is correct, we need to reflect on the extent to which the nature of engagement or lack of engagement by Christians with political authority has been a contributory factor. To what extent have we truly loved our neighbours as ourselves through personal, ecclesial and political action? If we can recover the social liturgy that is central to the gospel, we will not only be responding faithfully to the call of Jesus but also addressing some of the causes underlying the worst aspects of populism.

The temptation to avoid in the contemporary world is to define every popular political phenomenon we do not like as 'populist' and contemptible. The fact that something is popular does not necessarily mean that it is wrong. We need to have the humility to be self-critical and constantly evaluate our own beliefs through the lens of good theology rather than simply legitimate our convictions and prejudices with theology.

I hope that this edition of *The Bible in Transmission* will not only increase our knowledge and understanding of a remarkable phenomenon, but also our commitment to working out a faithful response. Our task, like that of the exiles in Babylon, is to 'seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jeremiah 29.7 NRSV).

Sources of Wisdom – a new range of resources for secondary schools

In September 2017, secondary schools began to teach updated and more rigorous GCSE Religious Studies courses with an increased focus on sacred texts.

As a response to these new courses, Bible Society has produced some innovative new resources to be used in schools, a series of four student booklets which we've called 'Sources of Wisdom'.

Written to support the specifications offered by the four English examination boards, the resources each integrate a selection of Bible passages with contextual information and tasks for the students to complete. They support the students in developing their understanding of how the Bible is a source of wisdom and authority for Christians and how Scripture influences Christian beliefs, teachings and practices today.

The full range of resources are available to purchase from our online shop biblesociety.org.uk/shop or to download for free from sourcesofwisdom.org.uk

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