

# CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

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**EVANGELICALISM IS MAINLY ASSOCIATED TODAY WITH THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE UNITED STATES.** But in Britain, a great deal of what is most admirable on the left in our political tradition can be traced back to the influence of the evangelical movement in the nineteenth century. Now that the evangelical movement is once again growing in numbers and influence in Britain, can we expect its political influence to follow the modern US course? Or will it instead be a progressive influence as it was in the past?

The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in 1804 and Bible Society is part of the enduring legacy of the extraordinary changes brought about in Britain after the Evangelical Awakening and the work of John Wesley. The legacy was by no means exclusively religious in character. The campaign to abolish first the slave trade and then slavery was led and supported primarily by men and women whose primary commitment was to Christianity in its evangelical form.

That was by no means the limit of the evangelical influence. I came across an example on holiday in South Africa in September. The American scholar Leonard Thompson relates an episode in 1842 when British gunboats were sent out over concern about what was happening in South Africa, and extracted a stipulation “that there should not be in the eye of the law any distinction of colour, origin, race or creed; but that the protection of the law, in letter and in substance, shall be extended impartially to all alike”.

Thompson adds the comment: “As that stipulation indicated, the evangelical lobby was still effective in British politics in the early 1840s”. He goes on to explain how waning evangelical influence allowed the commitment to impartiality between the races to wither later on.

Graham Dale has set out the forgotten story of the extent of the influence of Christian faith, in its evangelical form, in the establishment of the Labour Party 100 years ago. Many of the early leaders were church activists. Keir Hardie, the party’s founding father, seems to have attended the campaigns associated with the American evangelist Dwight Moody in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the mid-1870s, and wrote in his diary in 1877, aged 21, “Today I have given my life to Jesus Christ”. Hardie joined the Evangelical Union.

Towards the end of his life, in 1910, he wrote: “The impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement and the inspiration which carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus Christ than all other sources combined”. Of Arthur Henderson, ►

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► the party leader during World War I, it was said by his brother that “For Arthur, life began with conversion. Before that, he was just an ordinary boy”. Philip Snowden, Labour’s first Chancellor, wrote regularly about faith and politics, asserting that “personal salvation and social salvation are like two palm trees which bear no fruit unless they grow side by side”.

For those like me on the left of politics, there are grounds for optimism about the political influence of the modern evangelical movement in Britain. Consider its contribution to the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the relief of the debts of the poorest countries in the world, and the new proliferation of church-based social welfare projects in towns and cities throughout the UK.

The remarkable Jubilee 2000 campaign, which persuaded the British Government to cease deriving any gain from its outstanding loans to the poorest countries in the world from the end of the year 2000, derived most of its energy and commitment from a very broad spectrum of churches. Those who ran the campaign estimated that, of the people who turned up to form its huge human chains, and who sent in protest postcards to the Treasury, 80% of them were from the churches. The Jubilee 2000 director credited Tear Fund, the evangelical relief agency, with providing financial support that averted collapse at a critical stage. The influential journalist Will Hutton commented in the *Observer* newspaper in 1999:

“At the end of an increasingly secular century, it has been the biblical proof and moral imagination of religion that have torched the principles of the hitherto unassailable citadels of international finance – and opened the way to a radicalism about capitalism whose ramifications are not yet fully understood ... There is the moral basis for a new social settlement. The Left of Centre should take note; it is no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world – it’s Leviticus.”

As a Treasury Minister from 1999 until earlier this year, I was among those on the receiving end of the campaign. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was quite clear that it had been the campaign that had changed public opinion, making it possible for him to introduce substantial debt relief. It has been a decisive intervention with many of the characteristics of the anti-slavery campaign of 200 years ago.

More broadly, there is in Britain today a new social movement, a Christian social activism, whose significance has in my view not yet been fully understood. A visit I paid to Walsall earlier this year revealed the range of new social

ventures being undertaken by the churches there:

- The Vine, a young people’s drop-in working among young people excluded from school, in collaboration with the local council and further education college, set up initially on the initiative of the then Anglican rector
- First Base, providing supported housing for homeless young people, initiated by Walsall Evangelistic Centre
- the Carpenters’ Shop which recycles furniture, providing training for young people on carpentry and work for asylum seekers
- the Walsall Street Team which works among young prostitutes and drug abusers, with support from the local authority – a project of Walsall Community Church
- Stepping Stones, a 24-hour domestic abuse helpline run by volunteers from a number of churches
- The Lighthouse, a new project of black churches in Walsall, providing training for information technology skills with public funding.

Walsall is not unique. It exemplifies a new determination on the part of local churches to engage with the social problems of their communities, and a new willingness to work to change things for the better.

At the national level, with Jubilee 2000, and at the local level, with initiatives in churches across the country, we are starting to see a new pattern of effective engagement taking hold. The parallels with an earlier phase of Christian activism are striking. It was the practical outworking of religious convictions that led to the foundation of the Labour movement, and eventually the Labour Party. Today a new generation of Christians are looking at the social problems that surround them, locally, nationally and internationally, and are finding effective ways to address them.

This is a positive development that needs to be welcomed and nurtured. For too long Christians and the churches have been reluctant – or even afraid – to get involved. But as the Jubilee 2000 Campaign has demonstrated, when Christians speak out, Government will act. Concern about social disadvantage can be translated into change for the better.

The new Christian social activism can play a powerful role in the future of progressive politics in Britain, just as earlier one did. ■