

EDITORIAL

The De-Privatisation of Faith and Evangelicals in the Public Square

Calvin L. Smith (with Stephen Vantassel)¹

Key words: privatised faith, public theology, Britain, Islam, postmodernism

Abstract: Prior to the 1980s many sociologists and political scientists dismissed religion as a determinant of political behaviour. Yet the explosion of Protestantism in Latin America and the rise of radical Islam have propelled religion back onto the political stage. As recent events in Britain demonstrate, the country is beginning to question the merits of multiculturalism and invoking its Christian heritage in the process. Thus, as Christians in Britain and elsewhere awoken from the long slumber of privatised faith, how might Evangelicals formulate a coherent political worldview and compete in the public square?

In his comparative study of Pentecostalism in Costa Rica and Guatemala, Timothy Steigenga highlights how, prior to the 1980s, many sociologists and political scientists rejected religion as a determinant of political behaviour. The view that religion was irrelevant or inherently conservative, a penchant among academics for materialist explanations, and a rejection of models relying on belief, culture and psychology in favour of empirically-based (and thus deemed more elegant) theory all contributed to a dismissal of religion as a political actor. Yet the rise of Latin American liberation theology, the issue-driven politics of the Religious Right, and the Iranian revolution (to name but a few) all contributed to the 1980s resurrection of religion on the political stage.²

Aside from the emergence of a highly prominent brand of Evangelical politics in the U.S.³ (which continues to thrive, much to the chagrin of a diminishing number of sociologists who still advocate classic secularisation theory, namely, that modernisation invariably instigates religious decline),⁴ two

¹ Stephen Vantassel contributed to this paper with various suggestions and input. I am also grateful to Brian Edgar, Doug Petersen, and Timothy Sherratt for reading this paper and making valuable comments.

² Timothy Steigenga, *The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001), xiii-xvi.

³ i.e. the Religious Right, also known as the New Religious Right, or Evangelical right.

⁴ In sociology circles, 'secularisation' is a heavily-laden term with different meanings to various sociologists. So varied are the range of definitions that some sociologists even believe the term should be ditched completely (see discussion by Inger Furseth and Pål

recent developments have been particularly instrumental in propelling religion back into the social and political limelight. The first is the explosion of Evangelical (mainly Pentecostal) growth in Latin America, which draws heavily from among the poor who flock to Pentecostal churches in huge numbers. Yet Latin America is also the birthplace of another religious movement likewise drawing its support base from among the poor: liberation theology. Why, then, has Evangelicalism so successfully attracted the masses, dwarfing liberation theology in the process? What does it offer that liberation theology, which promised the poor so much, was unable to deliver? Some observers ask if Evangelicalism's worldview genuinely helps to liberate the poor from their life of drudgery and poverty, or does it merely help preserve the existing social order and serve as a useful prop for existing elites.

Consequently, Evangelicalism's massive growth across Latin America quickly captured the attention of sociologists and political analysts, leading to a further explosion: a boom in academic research exploring the political impact of Pentecostalism across that continent. Particularly important were two wide-ranging landmark studies in 1990, which were instrumental in highlighting the social and political importance of Latin American Protestantism. The first was by the sociologist David Martin (my doctoral examiner), who discussed Pentecostalism's potential to facilitate the emergence in Latin America of a bourgeoisie espousing democratic capitalism (much like the Puritan and Methodist revolutions).⁵ The second book, by David Stoll, examined Protestantism's collision with liberation theology and its potential as a generator of Latin American social change.⁶ Since 1990, countless studies have appeared exploring various facets of Protestantism and politics in Latin America.⁷ Moreover, this ripe field of research has been extended to include the social and political impact of explosive Pentecostal growth in Africa and elsewhere, while the entire phenomenon has arguably spawned (or at least popularised) a relatively new, interdisciplinary academic field, Pentecostal Studies, which is now well-established in universities and centres throughout Europe and North America.

A second development ushering religion onto the political stage is the rise of radical Islam, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Of course, political fallout rooted in Middle East conflict is nothing new. Yet Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation was motivated by nationalism and revolutionary socialism, not religion. (Even today, this

Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspective*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 82).

⁵ David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁶ David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990).

⁷ My own forthcoming book explores the nature and dynamics of Protestant-Sandinista relations in revolutionary Nicaragua (*Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict in Revolutionary Nicaragua*. Leiden: Brill, 2007).

secularism remains a source of tension between Fatah and its Hamas rivals). At its inception, the PLO also contained Marxist elements, while Arafat was closely connected with Castro's Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua.⁸ During the first anniversary of the Sandinista revolution held in Managua, Arafat declared, "The way to Jerusalem leads through Managua", a variation on earlier PLO themes that victory would come through Amman, Beirut and Damascus. Here, Jillian Becker says Arafat was "stressing the role of the PLO in the world Marxist revolution."⁹ Thus, Arafat and the secular PLO merely paid lip service to religion – whether Islam or Christianity¹⁰ – when it suited their purposes.

Yet the rise of Al Qaeda and other Islamic groups amalgamating religion and politics into an indivisible religio-political worldview and *raison d'être* (such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, or Hamas in Gaza) has greatly de-secularised the Middle East conflict. Moreover, Al Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center, a string of atrocities carried out worldwide by radical Muslims since, and events in Afghanistan and the ill-fated Iraq War, all mark a new era of religio-politics.

Commentators are divided on how to interpret these events. Some believe we are witnessing a clash of civilisations.¹¹ Others argue such a Manichaean view is unsophisticated, that the clash is between, on the one side, Western liberal civilisation *and* moderate Muslims, and on the other, radicals who have distorted and seek to hijack Islam.¹² Yet potentially the picture is even more complex, with Sunni Islam divided between pro-Western moderates and radical Wahabism, the former fearful of a dominant Shi'ite axis, the latter bent on conflict with Western liberalism whatever the cost. To this smorgasbord of competing theories we can also add Syrian and Iranian regional self-interests, the view that radical Islam is a reaction to Western (particularly U.S. and British) foreign policy, and the counter-argument which points out how the attacks of September 2001 took place *before* events in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Thus, the complex nature of this debate divides expert opinion. But whichever view one favours is irrelevant to the wider point being made here, namely, that the rise of radical Islam has helped propel religion back into the political fray. Subsequently, Islam has come under intense scrutiny as a political actor, especially in Western Europe, which has a large Muslim population.¹³ In

⁸ For details of these revolutionary ties, see my *Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict* (op. cit), 227-36.

⁹ Jillian Becker, *The Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 166-7.

¹⁰ For example, consider Arafat's appeal to a Christian nostalgia towards Bethlehem during the Church of the Nativity siege in 2002, when Palestinian militants hid there.

¹¹ This view served as the basis of a conference entitled *A World Civilisation or a Clash of Civilisations* on 20 January 2007, organised by the Greater London Authority. The main debate was between London Mayor Ken Livingston and Middle East expert Daniel Pipes.

¹² This view was recently articulated by former British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind ('The Conservatives Must Reject Neo-Conservatism', *The Spectator*, 12 August 2006).

¹³ 'Muslims in Europe: Country Guide', *BBC News* website (23 December 2005). See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4385768.stm> (last accessed 19 December 2006).

France, which counts 10% (over six million) of the population among its numbers,¹⁴ Muslims are increasingly politically-active and cohesive. Meanwhile, events such as the Madrid train bombings, the London suicide bombings in July 2005, or the Danish cartoon protests have all intensified scrutiny of home-grown Islam and its political worldview. Even the Netherlands, a bastion of liberalism and multiculturalism, is taking an increasingly hardened stance in favour of integrationism.¹⁵ Politicians in Holland, where Muslims number around a million in a population of sixteen million,¹⁶ are seeking to ban the *burqa*¹⁷ in public places on security grounds.¹⁸

The British Experience

Given this journal's aim to cover social and political issues throughout the world (consider, for example, how the present edition discusses globalisation, U.S. education, and Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria), it is worth dwelling for a moment on the current British religio-political situation. Here, support for multiculturalism also appears to be waning. Since this taboo subject¹⁹ was first broached by Trevor Phillips (the black chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality), who warned Britain was "sleepwalking towards segregation", the debate on British multiculturalism has progressed at full stride. At its core lies a growing unease with insular Muslim enclaves totally isolated from British society, where Sharia law is stealthily on the rise and practised unofficially,²⁰ and where radical Islam is gathering pace. One such enclave is the Muslim community of Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, hometown of Mohammad Sidique Khan who participated in the July 7 bombings. Dewsbury has also been linked with other radical activity.²¹ So acute is radical Islam in these enclaves that

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State. 'Background Note: France' (October 2006). U.S. Department of State website. See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3842.htm> (last accessed 12 December 2006).

¹⁵ Ian Buruma, 'Liberal Holland Hits the Cultural Panic Button', *The Sunday Times*, 19 November 2006. Also available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2092-2459781.html>.

¹⁶ 'Muslims in Europe: Country Guide' (op. cit.). The size of Holland's Muslim population was also discussed on the BBC's *The Politics Show*, aired 11 December 2006

¹⁷ An outer garment covering the entire body and face worn by some Muslim women.

¹⁸ Nicola Smith, 'Burqa Ban Splits Holland', *The Sunday Times*, 19 November 2006. Also available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-2459993.html>.

¹⁹ Consider how Ray Honeyford, a head teacher who in 1984 questioned the merits of multiculturalism, was subsequently vilified and forced to resign (see Karyn Miller et al, 'Headteacher Who Never Taught Again After Daring to Criticise Multiculturalism', *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2006. Available online at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/08/27/nmulticul27.xml>.

²⁰ Clive Colman, 'One Legal System? Think Again', *The Times* (online edition), 2 December 2006. See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1072-2482324.html> (last accessed on 11 January 2007).

²¹ Andrew Norfolk, 'How Bombers' Town is Turning Into an Enclave for Muslims', *The Times*, 21 October 2006.

recently *The New Republic*, a Democrat-leaning magazine, claimed the U.S.'s greatest security threat came not from Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan, but Britain.²²

In a British milieu increasingly conducive towards critiquing multiculturalism, a Muslim political worldview is increasingly scrutinised, especially since the July 2005 London bombings carried out by British-born Muslims. What has perhaps shocked Britons most is that a *YouGov* poll found one in four British Muslims actually expressed sympathy with the bombers' motives (though not their actions).²³ Meanwhile, more recent polling indicates further radicalisation among young British Muslims.²⁴ Thus, even some British Labour politicians appear to be shifting away (rhetorically at least) from the oft-perceived merits of multiculturalism. For example, consider the furore caused by former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's recent disclosure that he asked Muslim women to remove their face veil, which he regarded as a barrier to human communication, during his constituency surgeries.²⁵ Straw's comments broke a taboo and seem to have struck a chord among the British public. The veil debate took a new twist when a young Muslim schoolteacher (from Dewsbury, incidentally) refused to remove her veil in the classroom on the grounds religious expression. (It later transpired her decision to wear the veil, which owes more to culture than Islamic prescription, was on the orders of a radical cleric). More recently, in a Downing Street speech Prime Minister Tony Blair signalled the targeting of funding away from cultural and religious enclaves to groups promoting integration²⁶ (or in Trevor Phillips' words, "community cohesion"). He also bluntly stated that those who did not like the United Kingdom should not settle here. Thus, the debate surrounding multiculturalism has taken on a distinct

²² Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, 'Kashmir on the Thames', *The New Republic*, 4 September 2006

²³ Anthony King, 'One in Four Muslims Sympathises With Motives of Terrorists', *The Telegraph*, 23 July 2005. The poll is available on the *Telegraph* website at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/graphics/2005/07/23/npoll23big.gif;jsessionid=B2XCNEA3BGVLRQFIQMFSM54AVCBQ0JVC>.

²⁴ As this journal went to print, a Populus poll for the think-tank Policy Exchange found that nearly 40% of young British Muslims want to live under Sharia law, while a third of respondents believed Muslims converting to another religion should be punished by death. Such views were strongest among Muslims aged 16 to 24 years of age, many of whom admired al-Qaeda (see Graeme Wilson, 'Young, British Muslims "getting more radical"', *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2007, and Sam Coates, 'Extreme youth: The Muslims who would swap British law for Sharia', *The Times*, 29 January 2007.

²⁵ For non-British readers, a constituency surgery is when members of the public can meet with a Member of Parliament to discuss local issues and problems, much like a doctor's clinic, or surgery.

²⁶ Downing Street, 8 December 2006. See also Jenny Percival, 'Blair Outlines Curbs on Grants to Religious Groups', *The Times* (online edition), 8 December 2006. Available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,17129-2493989,00.html> (last accessed 9 December 2006).

religious tone as Britain grapples with political Islam in its midst. In short, these events have helped bring religion once again within the public sphere in Britain.

Importantly, this religio-political debate is beginning to move beyond radical Islam and multiculturalism to incorporate Christianity also. The proposed European Union constitution, which was dealt a death blow by referenda in France and Holland, included scant reference to religion, despite strong calls to the contrary from some politicians. But German Chancellor Angela Merkel is keen to revive the constitution (non-European readers might be unaware of this curious quirk of Euro-politics, namely, to keep asking the people the same question until they give what the Euro-political establishment considers is the correct answer). Merkel is now keen to revive the constitution with a distinctive Christian stamp,²⁷ helping to foster a European identity that also likely precludes Muslim Turkey's entry into the Union (or pushing it so far into the future to mean virtually the same thing).

In post-Christian Britain, too, where for many years faith has been regarded as an intensely private matter, many people are increasingly appealing to the nation's Christian heritage during the current multicultural debate. This is particularly the case since the July 2005 bombings and it seems hardly a week goes by without the national press (both tabloids and broadsheets) reporting on some or other issue that invokes references to Christianity (this in a national press where, years ago, one would search in vain for any mention of Christianity).

An example of this invocation of Christianity was during the furore caused by British Airways' unwillingness to allow a Christian uniformed member of staff, Nadia Eweida, to wear her cross visibly.²⁸ (The BBC similarly raised hackles when it questioned whether news anchor Fiona Bruce should wear a small cross during broadcasts). What made B.A.'s position untenable to many in a country embroiled in a debate on multiculturalism was that staff from other faiths *were* permitted to display some religious symbols (for example, the *hijab* and the Sikh turban). So incensed were politicians, the media and the public as a whole that soon calls for a boycott began to emanate.²⁹ Even a hundred Members of Parliament (among them Jack Straw) criticised B.A for its intolerance. The airline argued weakly that its uniform policy permitted jewellery to be worn, except not visibly, while it was impractical for items such as the *hijab* or turban to hidden from view. Whereupon the Archbishop of York John Sentamu promptly

²⁷ See, for example, Nicholas Watt, 'Merkel Backs More Christian EU Constitution', *The Guardian* (online edition), 29 August 2006. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/eu/story/0,,1860140,00.html> (last accessed 29 January 2007).

²⁸ More recently, bmi (formerly British Midland Airways) stopped a stewardess from carrying her Bible on flights into Saudi Arabia (see David Millward, 'Stewardess Banned From Taking Bible', *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2006).

²⁹ Even a new website calling for a boycott of the airline was set up and quickly inundated with viewers (<http://www.baboycott.com>, last accessed 10 January 2007). See also James Harding, 'Insensitive BA in a Tailspin Over Religion', *The Times* (Business section online edition), 24 November 2006, available at <http://business.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,8210-2469084,00.html> (last accessed 25 November 2006).

and mischievously offered Eweida a three-foot long cross to wear, arguing it would similarly be impractical to hide from view.

In fact, Sentamu's vociferous denunciation of B.A. was in sharp contrast to the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who that week flew to Rome on a B.A. flight to meet the Pope. Yet upon his arrival, an embattled Dr Williams, responding to the public's criticism of the airline, conceded that B.A.'s action was "deeply offensive". A somewhat bemused B.A. Chief Executive of the airline seemed totally out of his depth when questioned mercilessly about the incident during an interview on *Newsnight*, the BBC's flagship news analysis programme.³⁰ So strong was public opinion against B.A.'s perceived double-standards that after a turbulent week the airline capitulated and announced a review of its uniform policy.

There are various other examples of Christianity taking an increasingly visible position on the British political stage in 2006. John Sentamu, the Ugandan-born Archbishop of York, made an extraordinarily blunt (for an Anglican cleric) attack on illiberal secularists for ditching Britain's Christian heritage. He explained how in Uganda he and his countrymen regarded everything British as the best. He continued:

But now this country disbelieves itself in an amazing way. It almost dislikes its own culture. It doesn't realise that the arts, music, buildings have grown out of a strong Christian tradition.

Sentamu also denounced the BBC for its perceived pro-Islam, anti-Christian stance, making an astonishingly (again, for an Anglican cleric) blunt observation:

We [i.e. Christians] are fair game because they [the BBC] can get away with it. We don't go down there and say, 'We are going to bomb your place.' It is not within our nature.

He also questioned whether Muslim women should wear the veil in public, arguing society cannot be reconfigured around any individual or minority expecting to impose itself on public or civic life.³¹ Judging by widespread media coverage and public reaction Sentamu's views, which also included a rebuke of town halls for secularising Christmas celebrations to safeguard multicultural sensitivities, struck a distinctly resonant chord with much of the British public.

In fact, 2006 was marked by widespread press criticism of the secularisation of Christmas. Three-quarters of office bosses banned festive decorations so as not

³⁰ Aired on 23 November 2006.

³¹ David Sanderson, 'We Risk the Loss of Our Heritage, Says Archbishop', *The Times*, 13 November 2006. Also available online at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2451922_1,00.html. See also Brendan Montague, 'Archbishop Wages Winterval War on Creeping Atheism', *The Sunday Times*, 12 November 2006.

to offend multicultural sensitivities, together with health and safety concerns³² (another favourite target of a British public increasingly irritated by the ‘nanny state’ culture). Royal Mail’s decision not to include a Christmas theme on its holiday stamps was reported widely, while one newspaper deplored how just one percent of Christmas cards contained any religious content.³³ Meanwhile, across the land newspapers criticised some town halls’ decision to ditch Christmas in favour of generic celebrations with names such as Winterval.³⁴ Even Home Secretary John Reid railed against such anti-Christmas political correctness.

Criticism aimed at the secularisation of Christmas was also evident in 2005. That year an Asian Christian Labour councillor (a friend of mine) for Wolverhampton made national news defending Christmas against those who claimed it offended people of other faiths. By 2006 attacks on the de-Christianisation of Christmas had intensified greatly, doubtless because the dilution of Britain’s cultural and religious heritage serves as a powerful argument in the current multicultural debate. Ironically, people of other faiths are *not* the ones calling for religiously-neutral festive celebrations. Instead, the anti-Christian vanguard seems to be composed of secularists who, in the guise of respecting religious sensitivities, seek to further their own anti-religious aims. In 2006, though, Muslims were having none of it. Rejecting creeping secularism themselves, and likely fearing a backlash from an indigenous community increasingly suspicious of multiculturalism, some Muslim leaders joined forces with their Christian counterparts to denounce the secularisation of Christmas.³⁵

Further examples of Christianity on the British political scene in 2006 included various bishops’ support for legal action by Christian Unions against university Student Unions for withdrawal of privileges;³⁶ Bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir-Ali’s rejection of multiculturalism and his criticism of Muslims for holding a “dual psychology” of “victimhood and domination”;³⁷ and an

³² Amy Iggulden, ‘No Decorations, Please, It Might Cause Offence’, *The Telegraph* (online edition), 7 December 2006.

See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/12/06/nxmas06.xml> (last accessed on 10 January 2007).

³³ ‘Away With the Manger’, *Daily Mail*, 9 December 2006 (front page, main headline). See also Stephanie Condon, ‘Outrage Against Non-Christmas Cards Growing’, *The Telegraph* (online edition), 10 December 2006. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/12/09/nxmas09.xml> (last accessed 12 December 2006).

³⁴ See discussion in Jonathan Petre, ‘Leave Christmas Alone, Say Muslims’, *The Telegraph*, 15 November 2006.

³⁵ GMTV’s *The Sunday Programme* 10 December 2006.

³⁶ David Lister, ‘Bishops Back Student Fight For Religious Freedom on Campus’, *The Times* (online edition, education section), 24 November 2006. Available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2469153,00.html> (last accessed 3 January 2007).

³⁷ Christopher Morgan, ‘Bishop Attacks “Victim” Muslims’, *The Sunday Times*, 5 November 2006. Also available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2438570.html>.

increasingly bitter clash with government concerning the soon-to-be implemented Sexual Orientation Regulations.³⁸ Even SPCK bookshops announced a decision to stop selling the Koran as something “inimical to Christianity”.³⁹ Meanwhile, despite occasionally tying himself up in rhetorical knots and sending out mixed messages, the Archbishop of Canterbury, together with Catholic leaders, supported the launch of a new organisation, *Theos*, aimed at challenging secularism. (See Daniel Strange’s review and analysis of *Theos* in this edition).

In short, indignant Christians in post-Christian Britain are finding a new political voice and the courage to express their convictions. Recently, while about town I met someone from the local Anglican church who generally avoided discussing Christianity and politics. Hers was a thoroughly privatised faith. But the day we chatted, she was much exercised by events on the political stage, particularly the secularisation of Christmas and what she regarded as a grave threat against Britain’s traditional Christian values by political correctness, multiculturalism and radical Islam. She even wondered if the situation marked some precursor of forthcoming divine action, an eschatological viewpoint quite alien to both her own Christian experience and the worldview of her local church. In short, the de-privatisation of faith in the United Kingdom appears to be well-underway, and this new-found anti-secular voice has certainly found favour in some editorial quarters,⁴⁰ while leading some secularists to despair.⁴¹

Of course, it remains to be seen if the phenomenon will last. But this aside, for the moment it is somewhat startling for British Christians in a post-Christian society suddenly to encounter opinions in the newspapers and on the streets which increasingly invoke the nation’s Christian tradition and values. Of course, it is entirely possible this sentiment is partly the product of a right-wing media keen to promote its own populist, anti-Labour agenda. Moreover, such talk provides a vehicle through which some within the indigenous population can recapture a sense of identity, express dissent over an unpopular immigration policy, or even articulate coded racist views.⁴² Yet it would be wrong to suggest these are the only motivators for invoking Britain’s Christian heritage.

³⁸ As this journal went to print, a church-state battle over the implementation of SORs had become a major news story, with the Catholic Church in Britain threatening to close all its adoption agencies unless it was granted an exclusion from the regulations which require gay couples to receive equal consideration as adoptive parents.

³⁹ Christopher Morgan, ‘Church Bookshops Stop Selling Koran’, *The Sunday Times*, 3 December 2006. Also available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2484009.html>.

⁴⁰ Minette Marrin, ‘Hallelujah, They’re Standing Up For Jesus’, *The Sunday Times*, 19 November 2006. Also available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,24391-2460047.html>.

⁴¹ See comment by Bryan Appleyard, ‘Focus: Is It Time to Take God Out of the State?’ *The Sunday Times*, 22 October 2006.

Also available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2415625.html>.

⁴² For a discussion of religious Nationalism, see Furseth and Repstad (op. cit.), 104-6.

In Britain, then, religion (and particularly Christianity) is slowly but surely becoming a player once again on the political stage, much like religion elsewhere in the world, whether the clash of Christianity and Islam in northern Nigeria, how a Chinese communist government is struggling to control a burgeoning Christian church it regards as a threat,⁴³ an increase in religious fundamentalism in India, or how religious conflict threatens three civil wars in the Middle East.⁴⁴ It is little wonder that the former head of the British Army, General Sir Mike Jackson, concluded his Dimbleby lecture in December 2006 by stating:

*We face an uncertain and unknowable future. There are a variety of threats to our way of life. Attitudes, perceptions, even theologies, are now the dominant causes of conflict.*⁴⁵

As an academic subject, religion and politics is in the ascendancy. Christians are moving away from the long slumber of privatised faith and seeking to bring a Christian worldview to bear on social and political issues. Classic secularisation theory, which maintained that industrialisation and modernisation would lead to religion's total withdrawal into the private sphere, has proved unsophisticated. One need only consider the explosion of Protestantism in developing or modern societies like South Korea, Chile, Argentina and elsewhere, leading some sociologists to reappraise or redefine secularisation⁴⁶ or ditch the theory completely.⁴⁷ Over the past few years, 'public theology' has become an important curricular subject in Christian colleges and even secular universities. Meanwhile, if the number of books on faith and politics which this journal has received for review is anything to go by, the publishing houses are busy churning out books on the topic to an eager and expectant audience.

⁴³ In the latest of a long running saga between underground Protestant groups and the Chinese government, eight Chinese Christian leaders went on trial recently for allegedly inciting a demonstration of several thousand who were protesting against the forced demolition of a large church building by the police. It appears only one of the defendants actually attended the demonstration, and the defendants were likely singled out because of the widespread influence they wield (see Jane Macartney, 'Christians Go On Trial After Violence at Church Demo,' *The Times*, 23 December 2006.

⁴⁴ Stephen Farrell and Nicholas Blanford, 'Religious Split Could Set Region on Fire', *The Times*, 8 December 2006.

Also available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,7374-2493025.html>.

⁴⁵ 6 December 2006. Full text of the lecture is available on *The Times* website, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2491804,00.html>.

⁴⁶ For example, consider the earlier and later views of the sociologist Peter L. Berger.

⁴⁷ A comment appearing in *The Telegraph* discusses precisely this issue, see Michael Burleigh, 'Future Generations Will Hear Far More About God and Politics', *The Telegraph* (online edition), 7 November 2006.

See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2006/11/07/do0701.xml> (last accessed 10 November 2006).

EVANGELICALS AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

So where do Evangelicals fit in with this resurgence of religion in the public realm? Before discussing this issue, we should first define Evangelicalism which is notoriously difficult to characterise. Derek Tidball has stated: -

*Attempts at precise definitions are rather like attempts to pick up a slippery bar of soap with wet hands. Some are too narrow and exclude those that should be included. Such definitions often consist of a long doctrinal check-list. Some are so broad that they include those who patently should not be included, if the definition is to have any meaning.*⁴⁸

R.V. Pierard explains how the term 'Evangelical' comes from the Greek *euangelion*, meaning glad tidings or joyful news. In Middle English *euangelion* was translated to *godspell*, from which we get 'gospel'. Thus, Evangelicalism emphasises the gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ (a transcendent, personal God; divine grace and the forgiveness of sin through Christ; eternal life through faith; and a visible and personal return of Christ.) At the heart of Evangelicalism lies an emphasis on sharing this gospel with others, encouraging a personal response to accept the message of the cross, and the centrality of the Bible in issues of belief and practice.⁴⁹ Evangelicalism emphasises personal conversion, piety and a dynamic one-on-one relationship with Christ, which also makes it a highly individualised faith. David Bebbington has succinctly highlighted Evangelicalism's four central themes: crucicentrism (centrality of the cross of Christ), conversionism, Biblicism, and activism.⁵⁰ Tidball suggests Bebbington's definition of Evangelicalism "has quickly established itself as near to a consensus as we might ever expect to reach".⁵¹

Clearly, then, Evangelicalism is much more than a mere belief system. Rather, its very nature emphasises *action* as well as belief, manifested through sharing one's faith with others, reading the Bible, prayer, devotion, and the pursuit of holy living. Orthodox Evangelicals are missionary-minded, seeking conversions, and the movement is historically revivalist in nature. In short, Evangelicalism is active and urgent (Tidball observes of Evangelicals that "their religion is always a busy one"⁵²).

Given this strongly activist nature, it is therefore unsurprising to observe Evangelicalism's presence in the public sphere even during the slumber of

⁴⁸ Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of Today's Movement* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 12.

⁴⁹ R.V. Pierard, 'Evangelicalism', in Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984; repr. 1991), 379-82.

⁵⁰ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

⁵¹ Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals*, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

privatised faith. Certainly, the general retreat of faith to the private realm belies how Evangelicals have publicly (and often volubly) opined over issues like gambling, abortion, homosexuality, alcohol abuse, and so on well before the rise of the Religious Right. Meanwhile, during the Cold War Evangelicals expressed strong reservations against East Bloc communism's atheist materialism.

Not surprisingly, such views have led sociologists to regard Evangelicalism as inherently conservative and reactionary. This is true to a degree, but it is also a caricature. Consider, for example, the role played by William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect in the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. (Evangelicals were deeply involved in politics at this time, with some 112 MPs considered Evangelical.⁵³) A second example of Evangelical political outlook defying common stereotypes is the traditionally pacifist nature of U.S. Pentecostalism. (Donald Gee, one of the movement's foremost leaders in the U.K., was also strongly pacifist.⁵⁴) It was only in the late 1960s that the U.S. Assemblies of God softened its stance on pacifism, emphasising liberty of conscience which permitted members to choose combatant or non-combatant roles during Vietnam.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, one must differentiate today between the Evangelical left and Evangelical right, which again defies unsophisticated stereotypes so favoured by the European media in its portrayal of the movement in North America.

Thus Evangelicals have always been publicly voluble to a degree. Yet religion's increasing shift into the public arena has accelerated and greatly enhanced an active and sophisticated Evangelical participation in politics. Take the increasingly united and organised issue-driven Evangelical politics of the 1980s in the U.S.⁵⁶ The movement was undoubtedly assisted, at least in part, by a resurgence of postmillennialism which influenced the social and political outlook of many Charismatics, leading to the rise of restorationism and Kingdom Now theology.⁵⁷ Emerging from an otherworldly premillennialist eschatology, these Charismatics embraced postmillennialism which, similar to the ethical utterances of the Old Testament Prophets, offered a prophetic outlook that demanded the capture and transformation of social and political institutions to institute a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth.⁵⁸ Unlike apocalyptic premillennialism, this

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁴ John Carter, *Donald Gee: Pentecostal Statesman* (Nottingham: Assemblies of God Publishing House, 1975), 16-21.

⁵⁵ D. J. Wilson, 'Pacifism', in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 658-60.

⁵⁶ For details, see Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Events since the publication of this book arguably challenge Bruce's conclusions.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of these and other postmillennial variations, such as dominionism, reconstructionism, and theonomy, see Bruce Barron, *Heaven on Earth? The Social and Political Agendas of Dominion Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁵⁸ For a discussion of how Reformed theology influenced 'Third Wave' Charismatic eschatology, see C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1988).

utopian postmillennialist worldview is essentially optimistic in character, and immediately one notes a tension between both eschatological systems: the apocalyptic versus the prophetic; spiritual other-worldliness versus social this-worldliness; a *future* Kingdom of God established by Christ versus a Kingdom of God *here and now*, on earth, established by the Church. The result in the 1980s onward was heightened social and political activity among North America's Charismatic Evangelicals, the primary example being how 700 Club's Pat Robertson (ironically a premillennialist who nonetheless espoused Kingdom Now theology) sought the Republican Party's 1988 presidential nomination.

Yet not all Evangelical political activism is driven by the political right. Far from it. Ron Sider is a well-known Evangelical commentator who, while conservative on moral issues such as abortion, is nonetheless much more radical on other issues. Meanwhile, the Evangelical left is also politically vocal, counting figures such as Tony Campolo, Jim Wallis and Sojourners among its vanguard. (In a book reviewed by this journal, J. Budziszewski discusses how John Howard Yoder and the Anabaptist tradition have influenced the Evangelical left). Neither is the Evangelical left insignificant. Consider, for example, how in December 2006 Jim Wallis was asked to give the Democrat's weekly radio address.⁵⁹ Thus, the manner in which aspects of the European media's portray Evangelical politics as homogenous is, at best, unsophisticated.

Evangelicals, then, are increasingly active on the political stage, perhaps more than ever. In Britain, calls for Christian political participation are emanating from various quarters.⁶⁰ Neither are Evangelicals limiting their activism to moral declarations or traditional political territory. When David Cameron, the new British Conservative Party leader, set about formulating a new aggressive and progressive environmental policy, he was signalling how a modernised Conservative party was prepared to take on its political opponents, even if this meant venturing onto territory outside its traditional remit. In the same manner, Evangelicals have also begun to speak out forcefully on environmental issues, despite this traditionally being the preserve of the non-Evangelical religious left. In February 2006 the Evangelical Climate Initiative issued the "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action" statement, challenging the current U.S. approach to environmental issues. The document was signed by various leading Evangelicals from across the political spectrum. The statement's basic thrust was

⁵⁹ A transcript of Jim Wallis' address can be found on the Beliefnet and Sojourners website: <http://www.beliefnet.com/blogs/godspolitics/2006/12/jim-wallis-we-need-greater-moral.html> (last accessed 29 January 2007).

⁶⁰ Consider, for example, the recent launch of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, part of the Tyndale Fellowship. Its new Director, Jonathan Chaplin, recently issued a short paper which explores the first step in "developing a rounded account of authentically Christian democratic engagement" (see 'Christian Justifications for Democracy', *Ethics in Brief* 11 no. 3 Autumn 2006), while his inaugural lecture was entitled "Speaking From Faith in Democracy".) Title of paper here.

later challenged by other Evangelicals via the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance.⁶¹ Thus, green issues are increasingly debated within Evangelical circles.⁶²

In Latin America, too, some Evangelicals are moving firmly away from the separation of church and state to form their own political parties. Paul Freston has surveyed the rise of various Protestant political parties since the nineteenth century. He highlights a third wave of Protestant political party-making (the first two being the late nineteenth century and the 1920s-1950s), much of which is Evangelical in the wake of explosive Protestant (mainly Pentecostal) growth in Latin America and Africa.⁶³ Thus, we come full circle to where we began, namely, the explosion of Evangelicalism in the developing world and sociologists' attempts to establish what political impact it will have there.

In post-Christian Britain, too, Evangelicals are increasingly active in the public sphere. Consider the strong opposition to the Sexual Orientation Regulations, the massive mobilisation against the BBC's decision to air the controversial Jerry Springer Opera, or how Evangelicals were among the vanguard of protest against B.A.'s treatment of Nadia Eweida. Several schools forming part of the current government's flagship city academy system have Evangelical philanthropic backing and project a strong Evangelical ethos.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, a plethora of Evangelical political blogs are further testimony to the rise of Evangelical politics in the U.K. Moreover, Evangelicals are becoming increasingly vocal, as the events surrounding the Jerry Springer protests demonstrate.⁶⁵ In a recent report, the British Evangelical Alliance discusses the extent to which civil disobedience and even violence are acceptable actions in the face of continued assault on religious freedom.⁶⁶ The report was seized upon eagerly by the national press. It is clear British Evangelicals, as others, are jockeying for position in the current multicultural debate.

Naturally, Evangelicals must avoid excessive militancy or they face being caricatured as fanatics by secularists keen to portray them as little different from their radical Islamic counterparts. Yet while it is essential Evangelicals' actions are in keeping with Christ's radical vision portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount (so fundamentally at odds with Muslim extremism), nonetheless this does *not* preclude Evangelical participation in politics. Quite the opposite. As stated previously, Evangelicalism is an active movement where faith must be translated

⁶¹ Josh Rutledge, 'Evangelicals Spar Over Climate', *Washington Times*, 31 July, 2006. Also available online: <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20060730-113936-8819r.htm>.

⁶² John Shields, 'US Evangelicals Boost Green Lobby', *BBC News Website*, 5 July 2005. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4642241.stm> (last accessed 28 December 2006).

⁶³ Paul Freston, *Protestant Political Parties: A Global Survey* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

⁶⁴ See, for example, Francis Beckett, 'Christians Put Their Faith in Academics', *Times Educational Supplement* (online edition), 21 January 2005. See http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story_id=2067310 (last accessed 29 January 2007).

⁶⁵ It is alleged several BBC staff even received death threats over plans to air the opera.

⁶⁶ Evangelical Alliance, *Faith and Nation: Report of a Commission of Enquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2006), 121-122

into action if we are to be salt and light (Mt 5:13-14). Indeed, faith deeds lie at the core of New Testament Christianity, while faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14ff). Leaving aside that old chestnut which artificially seeks to pit Paul's justification theology against James' salvation by works, the New Testament makes abundantly clear that there is a tangible outworking, a translation, of our faith into concrete action. Even the Apostle Paul, that great articulator of justification by faith, nonetheless dwells at great length on personal Christian conduct and ethical behaviour. In short, faith not outworked is little more than 'ivory tower theology', a belief system that is sterile and un-dynamic, posing questions but offering little in the way of cast-iron solutions.

In fact, the Bible has much to say (and allude to) which governs Christian social and political behaviour. Christians are commanded to be good citizens. They must pray on behalf of government officials, permitting Christians to live in peace and tranquillity (1 Ti 2:1-3). Government gains its authority directly from God and exists to restrain bad behaviour (Ro 13:1ff). Christians must not only avoid revolutionary conduct but also actively support government by paying taxes. Clearly Paul understood that social stability was beneficial for the proclamation of the gospel and the wellbeing of humanity.

Christians may also choose whether or not to utilise their citizen rights. Christ chose not to use his right of self-defence at his trial. Paul frequently delayed announcing his Roman citizenship but did invoke his right of appeal to Caesar when he considered it in his interest. Christians are also commanded to do good to all people (Gal 6:10; see also the Good Samaritan). Our actions and words should be guided by a commitment to truth and moderated by compassion to heal. We must work to help the weak, downtrodden, and neglected, not so much by telling other people what they must do, but by showing them a better way. However, we must also be faithful to proclaim the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

Finally, Scripture teaches that government, though divinely established, is sometimes an enemy of the Church. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus, the actions of the Sanhedrin against the early Church, and the book of Revelation demonstrate how government can become an anti-Christ which must be resisted. However, such resistance is not one of violence. Rather it is through Christ-like sacrificial giving, even the giving of one's life in martyrdom. Paul submitted to Rome's authority to execute him, as Christ did. Paul left the judgement of Rome to God and avoided the taking up of arms in violent rebellion.

Certainly more insights can be found. However, we believe these truths are so clearly taught that the Evangelical left and right can agree with them. Thus, it seems abundantly clear that biblical Christianity has every right to observe, critique, even participate directly in the political sphere.

However, in recent years an unfortunate problem has arisen within Evangelicalism. Arguably, as Evangelical political outlook has developed, debate within the movement on a range of issues has become increasingly polarised. We refer, of course, to how Evangelical political outlook has often failed to move

beyond mimicking secular politics, resulting in the emergence of an Evangelical left and Evangelical right which is (like its secular counterpart) strongly partisan.

It is inevitable that the concept of political cleavage will have a bearing on individual Christians' political outlook. It is also true that the emergence of both an Evangelical left and right serve as a useful counterbalance to each other. But it is surely problematic *from a Christian perspective* that all too often our politics shape our religious worldview, rather than the other way around. Sadly, Evangelicals on the left or right often retreat to their respective entrenched positions, rather than working together to seek imaginative, biblical, Kingdom-based analyses and political solutions that owe more to our common faith than any political cleavage. In short, Evangelicals must be prepared to reassess their loyalties on some issues, even if that means listening to fellow Evangelicals with completely different views. Both sides have a great deal to teach each other, and we do well to listen carefully and consider seriously what is being said. More often than not, such an approach will greatly reinforce, enhance, even reshape our views. What could be more scriptural, to listen, debate with, and discuss in a loving manner key issues in order to win over our fellow Christian?

The Need for This Journal

Unfortunately, there are few vehicles for such cross fertilisation of ideas and values. Certainly, there are religio-political forums, including some Evangelical examples (though considerably fewer in number). Moreover, the latter are often partisan vehicles that tend to "preach to the choir". More platforms to encourage genuine, non-partisan debate across the Evangelical political spectrum are urgently needed. Thus, this journal's editorial board is committed to presenting the full spectrum of Evangelical thought to provide readers with thoughtful, scholarly debate and original research that is biblically-based and theologically-sound. The journal also seeks to stimulate quality debate aimed at disseminating both left and right with new ideas and approaches encouraging a more Christ-centred, hermeneutically-viable worldview which moves firmly away from a purely partisan approach. Partisanship will likely never fade, but its primacy in dictating Evangelical political outlook must surely be challenged.

Evangelical political debate must also be based on rigorous hermeneutics. This is especially so considering how the New Testament does not deal directly with questions relating to Christian involvement in a contemporary political setting. Does Scripture's command for the Church to assist the poor require Christians to lobby government to fund social programs? How much, if any, of the political and legal content of the Old Testament can be properly applied today? How can we distinguish what the Bible commands societies to do from what they may do? And should Christians work to Christianise politics? Straight away one sees that grammatico-historical interpretation alone is ill-equipped to deal with such questions. Today's political climate requires a hermeneutical approach that takes Scripture seriously by identifying and applying general biblical principles and values to new contexts not seen in Bible days.

As well as various social and political issues, there are several important theoretical questions for Evangelicals to consider. For example, should Christians espouse an all-encompassing Kuyperian-type system (“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine’”) which interprets anything and everything through the spectacles of a Christian worldview, much like Marxism and feminism do? Or should Christian political involvement take a more Lutheran dualist approach (“Render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s”, Mt 12:17), limiting political activity to those areas that have a bearing on the spiritual or otherworldly sphere? Are Christians called to establish a religio-political Kingdom of God as an archetype of Christ’s eschatological kingdom, or not? What form of government is best, and how should Christians actually participate in the public sphere? How does Evangelicalism fit in with the narratives of globalisation and postmodernism? What of Evangelicalism and politics in different parts of the world, for example its effects in China under communist rule, or its long-term impact in Africa and Latin America? These are just some of the many questions this journal is keen to explore.

There are various other social and political issues which require Evangelical scrutiny, and we embrace the need for a scholarly and theoretical treatment of these. However, we also believe scholars must work to provide concrete and thoroughly Christian answers to specific questions facing contemporary Christians, including Just War theory in light of asymmetrical warfare, bioethics and the moral limits of scientific inquiry, environmental exploitation and poverty, globalism and trade, ethics of Christian participation in politics, genocide, ethnic cleansing and international responsibility, or how a Christian should determine who to vote for. The task before Evangelicals is large and difficult, yet it is important for all of us to undertake this work thoughtfully and prayerfully because the Church needs answers and the world needs us to be salt and light.

Finally, Evangelicals must be prepared to submit their analyses to rigorous critique, and where found wanting they must be prepared to adapt as necessary. Hence, the journal welcomes *non*-Evangelical critiques of Evangelical political and social thought, providing they are suitably respectful of our values and beliefs, and also relevant to the aims and readership of the journal.

This first edition of the *Evangelical Review of Society and Politics* kicks off the debate by covering a wide range of issues. By doing so it deliberately sets out to begin as it intends to continue, namely, to provide readers with an interdisciplinary resource, to offer both theoretical and practical approaches, and to focus upon various global regions. This introductory editorial has dwelt somewhat on the British experience. Meanwhile, Richard Gibbs discusses the Church’s mission in an age of globalisation, exploring the implications of the Church’s distinctiveness as a grace-defined community for its socio-political mission in a globalised world. William Cox’s paper, on the other hand, focuses on North America, suggesting federal government must be removed from control of education if the religious rights of U.S. citizens are to be restored. Research notes by Emmanuel Sule explore the little-known clash between Christians and

Muslims in northern Nigeria, while the review section includes critical reviews of important new books exploring Christianity and politics.

I began this paper by outlining two important developments helping to propel religion back onto the political stage. To this I might add a third which, if perhaps not exactly bringing religion back into the public realm, nonetheless provides a milieu in which it can theoretically flourish. I refer, of course, to the rise of postmodernism. Now, some readers may well wonder (with some justification) why such a relativist, subjective, and thus anti-Christian phenomenon is somehow conducive towards a greater Evangelical involvement in politics. Yet a careful examination demonstrates this indeed to be so.

Modernity (roughly from the Enlightenment to the 1960s), rather than postmodernism, has arguably been Christianity's greatest philosophical enemy. This was not so much by virtue of modernity's negative approach to the Bible, which has sometimes been problematic for orthodox Christianity (though some Christian scholars have proved rather adept at cherry-picking the more positive aspects of the historical-critical approach and discarding the rest). Rather, modernity's ultimate threat has come through its propagation of atheist secularism, which arrogantly dismisses all other views (including Christianity) as dysfunctional. This philosophical system was underpinned by modernity's emphasis on absolutism, objectivity and belief in a higher authority. Such a milieu sounds most conducive towards propagating a Christian worldview, one may argue. Except, of course, modernity's higher authority was Man and Science, not God, while its absolutes were its own secular humanist pronouncements. Everything else was impatiently swept to one side.

But with the advent of postmodernism, all this has changed. Today's postmodernism says there is *no* higher authority, or rather there is a multitude of higher authorities, except none is higher than the others. Thus, any and all philosophies and worldviews are equally valid. None are 'right' or 'wrong' because these are relative concepts. Within this *marketplace of ideas* modernist secularism no longer automatically holds the privileged position it once commanded. *All* ideas must now jockey for position. Thus, as Brendan Sweetman points out, secularism is simply another worldview, and Christianity has as much right to express its worldview, in fact more so because without religion there is *no* true pluralism, just an artificial, relativist debate.⁶⁷

Secularism's arrogance and obliviousness to its relegation within the marketplace of ideas was nowhere more evident than in *The Problem of Atheism*, a documentary by broadcaster Rod Liddle and aired by Britain's Channel Four in December 2006.⁶⁸ Several secularist academics interviewed (including Richard Dawkins) appeared distinctly antediluvian when insisting with quite breathtaking arrogance that people had no justification *whatsoever* to hold to belief systems incorporating a god. (Incidentally, Sweetman demonstrates how secularism's own

⁶⁷ Brendan Sweetman, *Why Religion Needs Politics: The Place of Religious Argument in the Public Square* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁶⁸ 18 December 2006.

moral declarations, ritual, and organisation make it a belief system). In a relativist age, such absolutist pronouncements appeared completely outdated, while Rod Liddle (himself no great friend of Christianity) appeared genuinely flabbergasted, comparing such dogmatism with extreme religious fundamentalism.

Liddle's basis for questioning secular dogmatism was that, "Day by day, the limits of Darwinism are becoming increasingly clear". The film included comments from a University College London academic detailing how Darwinism's de-emphasis of the primacy of Mankind helped spawn the rise of a new discipline – eugenics – which regarded humans as little different from other animals, or even plant life. As the academic noted, it is a short step from here to Hitler's view that one race is inferior to another. Thus, Rod Liddle could not help but ask each of his guests how long it would be before (modernist) Darwinism would eventually be overhauled by the current science.

In a relativist and subjective milieu such as postmodernism, any and all ideas are (theoretically at least)⁶⁹ equally valid. Thus, much like Christianity secularism is now forced to "fight for its corner" as just one of various competing worldviews. What a delicious irony! Modernist secularism, for so long the bane of Christianity, now finds itself in exactly the same position. Meanwhile, Christianity is no longer hamstrung and can compete in the marketplace of ideas as an equal. Consider, for example, the re-emergence of biblical theology within academic theology⁷⁰ (though not ecclesiastic theology, which has *always* espoused biblical theology and may well wonder what all the fuss is about). It is not, of course, that postmodernism necessarily accepts the presuppositions of revelation, inspiration, and metanarrative which all underpin biblical theology.

⁶⁹ Theoretically because secular liberal elites exploit postmodernism's relativism (especially on morality issues) when it suits their purposes, but are unwilling to reciprocate and give Christianity's voice a fair hearing when it does not. Take, for example, the proposed Sexual Orientation Regulations, which arguably place the rights of homosexuals over Christian conscience. *Times* columnist Matthew Parris, a gay former Conservative M.P., regards society's ease with homosexuality as the morality of the majority, while labelling minority views to the contrary (that is, Christianity) a 'rogue belief' (Matthew Parris, 'My Week', *The Times*, 25 January 2007). Meanwhile, Home Secretary John Reid (who ironically denounced the secularisation of Christmas in December 2006), went against his own Catholic Church and sided with the majority within Cabinet who support SORs for ideological reasons, quoting John F. Kennedy's view that private religious beliefs should have no bearing on how public servants carry out their duties (Andrew Pierce, 'Catholic MPs Warn Blair of Voter Backlash', *The Telegraph*, 26 January 2007). Thus, *theoretically* postmodernism creates an equal marketplace of ideas, but *in reality* secular liberal elites still seek to monopolise the political and philosophical agenda by appealing to such non-postmodernist (in fact, quite modernist) concepts as absolutism and their own higher authority.

⁷⁰ Recently, numerous biblical theology books have been published. A particularly important work which discusses some of the philosophical and theoretical issues which biblical theology raises, is Craig Bartholomew et al, eds. *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*. Scripture and Hermeneutics Series Volume 5. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

Rather, within a postmodernist milieu, such an approach to biblical studies is no less valid than any other. Modernity's historical-critical approach to biblical studies no longer automatically holds sway.

In the same manner, modernity's worldview no longer holds the privileged position or offers the objective certainties it once commanded. This paves the way for alternative analyses which an ever-fragmented society eagerly demands. Just as in Acts 17 Paul's presentation of Christianity within the Athenian marketplace of ideas immediately won over converts, likewise today people are searching for a grand narrative that speaks to their fears and hopes in a coherent manner. Christianity clearly holds answers people find attractive, as the mass conversions in Latin America, Africa, China, Korea and elsewhere demonstrate. In the political sphere, too, Christianity is able to offer imaginative solutions. Thus, while postmodernist relativism is indeed the direct antithesis of Christianity, nonetheless it creates a milieu which Evangelicals can exploit in order to express its views in philosophic fashion.⁷¹ This is indeed an exciting time for this journal to be launched and participate in the shaping of the political agenda from an Evangelical perspective.

Calvin Smith is Course Director at the Midlands Bible College, England, and part-time Postgraduate Tutor in Theology, University of Wales, Lampeter. Stephen Vantassel lectures at the Midlands Bible College and is also Adjunct Professor of Theology, Trinity Theological Seminary (Indiana), USA. Both edit the Evangelical Review of Society and Politics.

⁷¹ See comments by D.A. Carson (*The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).