

CAN CHRISTIANS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND SOCIETY

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The voting patterns of Christians are very little different from those who make no claim to that label. A large national survey in 1998, for example, found that Australians who attend church were a little more likely to vote Liberal (37%) than Labor (35%), with ten per cent voting for one of the minor parties, and 15 per cent swinging from one party to another. Among those who never went to church, 40 per cent said they would vote Labor, 30 per cent Liberal, and, again, 10 per cent for one of the minor parties, and 18 per cent would swing. The differences between those who attend church and those who do not were statistically not significant.

Surely, one would expect that out of the Christian faith would come a different set of values and a different approach to society. A large portion of Australians (around 55%) say faith provides a foundation for their values. Religion is about morality and decency. It is not only about how we live, but what we want for the good of the whole society.

Yet, when one actually tries to measure people's values, the differences often seem small between Christians and others. Whether one compares people who believe in a personal God with those who are not sure about God or believe there is no God, or people who attend church compared with those who never attend, their values are often similar. The same large survey conducted in 1998 by NCLS Research and Edith Cowan University provides the evidence. In it, more than 6000 Australians were asked to rate the importance of twenty-two values as well as respond to a variety of moral and social issues (Hughes et al, 2003).

As would be expected, Christians valued more being devout and having a spiritual life. They also valued more having meaning in life and wisdom. They thought that helping other people was more important than did those who did not attend church or believe in a personal God. Interestingly, they also placed more importance on cleanliness and politeness.

Those who did not believe in a personal God or attend church put more emphasis on enjoying the sensual aspects of life, on excitement and wealth. They also placed more importance on creativity and broadmindedness, and on the care of the environment.

There was little difference between Christians and others in relation to the values of equality and honesty, world peace and national security, social justice and social recognition, success and true friendship.

Issues where Christians stand out

There are issues on which Christians and most other people have strong and different opinions. These are mainly the issues about sexuality and about life. For example, close to 40 per cent of church attenders say that abortion and euthanasia can never be justified under any circumstances – compared with just 5 per cent of those people who never attend a church. Fifty-two per cent of church attenders say that sex before marriage is wrong, compared with just 6 per cent of those who do not attend church. And 77 per cent of church attenders say that sexual intercourse between adults of the same sex is wrong compared with 42 per cent of those who never attend a church.

In terms of involvement in community life, Christians are also somewhat different from others. Christians are more likely to be involved in voluntary activities assisting people who need help. They are more likely to be involved in a community group or organisation in an unpaid capacity. Indeed, the factor which most clearly separates people involved in the community and those not involved is whether people are involved in a church. Churches motivate people to be involved. They train them for involvement, and they remain one of the main channels through which people are engaged in working in the community.

Nevertheless, the survey of 1998 found no significant differences, for example, between Christians and others in their attitudes to claiming government benefits to which one is not entitled or cheating on taxes if one had a chance. There was no difference in the importance Christians and others give to protecting freedom of speech or fighting rising prices. There were no differences in regard to the comparative importance of ensuring economic growth or sustaining the environment. There was no difference in regards to the role of the government in reducing income inequality or the functioning of private enterprise.

Reasons for the differences

Why is there no difference in regards to many social issues? One reason is that our Christian traditions have often dismissed matters of the world and society as being of less importance than spiritual and personal matters. We have focussed on our relationship with God and the expression of that in personal morality and in up-holding the family. But, to coin the words from an old chorus, in the light of our relationship with God, 'the things of earth grow strangely dim'. As long as our personal lives are right with God, what happens to our communities is not very important.

Perhaps partly because of our focus on personal faith, we have failed to think through the issues of society. There is a slight tendency for people who attend church to say that they 'don't know' more frequently than church attenders to many social issues. In relation to whether it was the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between high and low income earners, one in four of all church attenders said they were neutral or unsure. In terms of whether private enterprise was the best way to solve Australia's economic problems, more than forty per cent said they were neutral or unsure.

On the other hand, there are some issues on which people have done much thinking and come to quite different conclusions. The environment is one example. Some Christians have seen God as creating the world for the benefit of human beings. For these people, the destruction of species, in itself, for example, is not a bad thing particularly if there is a benefit for human beings. Other Christians come to different conclusions. God has given human beings the task of caring for creation, for maintaining its beauty and diversity and ensuring that our planet remains a viable environment for life in all its variety of forms in times to come.

The earliest Christians lived in a time and a place in which they had little chance to have an impact on the structures or shape of their social world. They also believed that it would not be long before

the end of human history and their primary task was to prepare for the second coming of Jesus. Yet, within that context they began to develop principles which had huge social implications: the principle of equality before God of people of different social classes, both slave and the free person, of males and females, and of people of different races (Galatians 3:28). They began the struggle with the issues of wealth and poverty and what that meant for the new communities they were forming (James 2:1-7). They struggled too with the issues of the authority of government which they want to respect (Romans 13:1-5), but which they also found was not always fair and was soon involved in persecuting Christians (Revelation 17:12-14).

Our context is different, as we live in a democracy which puts certain obligations on us. As Christians and as citizens, we are called to have a say about the formation of government and the policies which are used to shape the society in which we live. We are called to think through and express our opinions about the social issues of today: of welfare and education, of health and environment, of economy and community, of peace and war. The survey research indicates that we still have a lot of thinking to do to find God's will and way for Australian society.

Reference:

Hughes, P., Bond, S., Bellamy J., and Black, A., 2003, *Exploring What Australians Value*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne and NCLS Research, Sydney.

Note:

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