

FAITH AND POLITICS

Reflections on the relationship of politics and faith since the last federal election

Last year one of the major tasks undertaken by EA Public Theology was to help provide information about the issues faced at the Federal election. About 21 articles by 15 people were produced and placed on our web-site. These can still be found at <http://www.ea.org.au/> under 'Public Policy'.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS AND CHANGING ALLEGIANCES

If a week is a long time in politics then an election week is an eternity. Last November public perceptions of the role of 'evangelical', 'conservative', 'pentecostal', 'charismatic' Christians in the political scene changed dramatically and since then the changes have continued. They call into question a number of previously held assumptions.

1. The election result challenged the idea that faith and politics had little in common.

In its preparation of material for last year's Federal election EA asked *all* political parties to provide an article, 'Why a Christian should vote Liberal (or Labour/Australian Democrat/Family First etc)'. But, despite repeated requests, we were spectacularly *unsuccessful* in getting them. We ended up with only two contributions from seven major parties!

We had thought this was a fairly straightforward request, even though we wanted a theological/biblical analysis by someone at least familiar with theology as well as politics. Perhaps we asked the wrong people, although we ended up asking a number from each party, usually one being some kind of party official.

The results were in marked contrast to the situation when we did the reverse and asked people engaged in theology to reflect on politics, in which latter case our approaches were never rejected. Before the election theologians were willing to talk politics but the politicians didn't want to know about faith! And some even found it threatening.

One former political party backroom analyst helpfully suggested that the reluctance of the politically engaged to contribute a theological justification of their own party policies was because the Christians in the party did not want to put anything down on paper that would expose them to criticism from their enemies.... and of course, he observed, their *real* enemies were in their own party! Faith was seen as a potential liability.

How times change. Since the election not only have those who are politically engaged been much more keen to demonstrate a connection of faith and policy but even some of those individuals and groups claiming no overt faith have shown interest in discussing the matter.

2. Post-election events have challenged the assumption that if faith and politics are to be related that it necessarily means an association of faith with the political right.

In our discussions with people prior to the elections it was clear that many Christians just assumed that faith and the political right naturally went together - though there were various differences of opinion as to whether that meant voting Christian Democrat, Liberal or Family First.

Some actually found our attempt to theologically and biblically evaluate *all* political stances threatening. Others assumed that it was a failure for a Christian organisation like EA not to endorse a particular party (though again, different people had different ideas as to which party that should be).

EA does not endorse any party or any position on the so-called left-right spectrum. For that reason negotiations to participate in a pre-election program with one Christian media body which provides social commentary to both the Christian community and the wider community broke down. They were unwilling to *even talk* about the policies of a couple of major political parties. Even giving space to a discussion of their policies in relation to biblical principles was anathema.

The assumption that faith and the political right always go together can perhaps be understood as an issue related to the fundamental theology of the kingdom. Christians of the political right and those of the political left tend to have different philosophies of engagement with social issues and with existing social and political groups.

Those on the left are more likely to engage in political and social issues in such a way that they participate *within* existing groups and parties and do so as Christians less overtly than those on the right. Those on the right seem to be more likely to form their own group or party and thus become more noticeable to both the Christian community and the general public.

In other words Christians are involved in both left and right (and a number of other directions as well) but tend to do so in different ways. Obviously this is a generalisation, but one which is perhaps not too unjust. The differences in approach here are worth exploring further at some later time in theological terms as the issue relates to different understandings of the way the kingdom of God is seen in relation to the church and to the world.

Another factor involved in breaking down this connection of 'faith' and 'The Right' has been the way politicians of all persuasions have taken heed of the need to very deliberately consider the Christian view of politics and values. Some have undertaken very public visits to high profile churches while others have discussed the matter with less fanfare in parliamentary rooms. It is clear though that there is an intention for all sides of the political spectrum to relate to faith issues more directly.

One other influence has been the way Family First has related to aboriginal issues and industrial relations. Initially, the party was widely perceived as relating the political right and evangelical Christians, but there are signs that the party may not align itself according to simplistic left-right terminology.

As a consequence of all this the nature of the public debate may continue to change.

3. The debate about faith and political values may become more nuanced and sophisticated as it encounters issues such as industrial relations.

It seems that at the election many Christians were influenced by the public declarations of faith (and non-faith) made by various politicians at the prompting of the media.

Consequently, some lauded politicians such as John Howard, John Anderson and Peter Costello and declared the coalition win to be a victory of the faithful.

However, Christians and Christian organisations that publicly supported and advocated for a party because of the perceived faith of its leaders may already be finding this an awkward position to maintain as some of their supporters are now starting to believe themselves to be negatively or unjustly affected by new industrial relations proposals. Historically, evangelical faith and support for workers and working conditions have often gone together hand-in-hand.

The end result could well be that the Christian debate about policies and politics will become more nuanced and sophisticated and less based on simplistic interpretations of politics and faith.

On the political side it will mean jettisoning over-simplified interpretations based on a single left-right antithesis. One conservative letter-writer in the post-election period responded to EA's support for overseas aid as 'leftist nonsense'. This position that was soon shown to be deficient by the overwhelming response to the tsunami appeal. A Christian response to political and social issues does not have to be based on an approach that is controlled by traditional left-right categories. Some issues cross that divide and cannot be simply explained by reference to a 'left' or 'right' tag. As it has been said, 'for every difficult and complex issue there is always a solution which is simple – and wrong.'

Many of the issues of faith and politics that we have found in Australia in recent times are mirrored by events in North America. In the USA some Christians found it necessary to run a campaign during the last presidential election declaring that 'God is not a Republican'. If anything, they faced a situation where Christian (and especially evangelical) faith and the politics of the right were even more closely identified in the minds of many people. It seems though, that those seeking to break any necessary connection between faith and the right have had some success.

Left-leaning evangelical luminary Ron Sider (best known as author of 'Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger') has just co-edited a very substantial book 'Toward an Evangelical Public Policy' which has been produced by the National Association of Evangelicals (probably traditionally considered as representing a largely Republican constituency). The book contains work by 23 evangelicals and the aim was to achieve some consensus on evangelical civic responsibility.

This dialogue produced a document 'For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility' was produced which was signed by a very broad range of evangelical leaders. While there is a great deal of agreement on the ends being sought (a just society, protection of the weak, care of creation etc) there remain differences with regard to how this is accomplished, especially with regard to the role of government.

It is also to be hoped that there will be a greater sophistication when it comes to assumptions about the faith and the intentions of politicians. The belief that an expression of Christian faith (however nebulous) by a politician means that they deserve to receive the support of Christians ahead of any other politician is deeply flawed. Personal faith is by no means unimportant in politics but some will want to vote on the basis of policies that are being presented and the goals envisaged rather than on the faith that is declared.

It is possible to argue that Australian politics has generally become more involved with the 'cult of personality' (following the form of the American presidential elections) and it may well be that attraction to a politician by virtue of their declaration of faith is a spiritualised version of the same thing. Having noted that, however, it is important to say again that the faith of a person is not an unimportant factor to the extent that it impacts the way policies are devised and implemented.

The Christian public has an obligation not just to support Christian politicians but also to hold them accountable to the implications of faith and to question the system in which their primary loyalty is to the party room rather than the good of the whole people.

While it is to be hoped that public discourse will become more sophisticated there is also the possibility that Christians will find the corporate situation too complex and will revert to purely individualistic interpretations of faith. In recent times evangelicals have been particularly prone to this.

However, it is worth noting that in the pre-election period EA not only met with those who held the un-thinking assumptions referred to above, but was also greatly encouraged by many Christians who responded very appreciatively about the non-partisan, biblical and theological discussion of issues they found on the web-site. Web-site statistics can often be made to say lots of things, but if we carefully exclude all reference to those who entered the site but did not stay to look around we can still say that over 10,000 people had a good look at the material that was there!

Given such interested people there is great potential for the faith and politics debate to go much further. But is there any way to guarantee that this dialogue of faith and politics will actually be helpful rather than damaging?

4. A more extensive Christian influence in politics and social affairs will not be beneficial unless it questions the commonly held assumptions about political and social goals and processes.

It is tempting to assume that a greater level of involvement in political and social values by Christians will benefit both faith and society, but that could be just another simplistic assumption.

It may seem negative to suggest that a more extended Christian contribution could be damaging but there are three good reasons for at least considering this option.

- The first is the Christian doctrine of sin which reminds us that no-one and no organisation or body is exempt from it.
- The second is the historical fact that there have been times when Christians have abused political and secular power.
- The third is that if we are to analyse the motives and goals of others we must be honest enough to submit ourselves to the same kind of close analysis.

It is possible that a more developed Christian contribution to public and social debate could actually lead to a divided and conflicted Christian voice if political allegiances become more significant than unity in Christ. It is also possible that some forms of Christian involvement in social affairs could lead to an increase in social disharmony in relation to other religions.

But, real as these possibilities are, I suspect that they are not the most likely problems that a Christian political presence faces. The greater and subtler danger is that of *distorting Christian faith by an uncritical appropriation of the methods and the goals commonly considered to be appropriate for social dialogue and political action.*

A genuinely Christian participation in politics and social dialogue is not achieved either by a simple substitution of Christian goals for secular ones or by an uncritical adoption of the socially acceptable processes for gaining power and influence.

Most importantly, Christians must not simply follow the example of other interest groups and seek benefits for 'the Christian constituency'. We must not confuse the desire *to achieve Christian goals* with *achieving goals for Christians.*

The fundamental goal is not primarily to achieve a position of influence or power in order to be able to exercise political and social control for Christian ends. Political influence is as inherently dangerous for Christians as material wealth.

Jesus did not say directly that it is harder for the powerful and influential to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but his own example and the words of the apostle Paul about weakness and power suggest something similar. Indeed, power and wealth are intimately connected and the Christian life is by no means lost, nor the gospel diminished, simply by virtue of being considered weak or vulnerable or of little status. The example of Jesus and the teaching of Paul emphasise this fact. But the Christian ethos is in grave danger when Christians become wealthy or powerful or influential.

In the past there have been very obvious times when the church has 'won' the political struggle for power and influence but, in doing so, has lost the gospel. When the medieval church accumulated social power through political and even military means it resulted in the disaster that was the Crusades - something that continues to adversely affect our society eight hundred years later.

The present danger is that Christians will uncritically adopt the common means of political and social change that are used today in our liberal democratic society. The undoubted benefits of democratic processes need to be balanced with a recognition of some risks.

Adopting the methods of the political processes which exist today can lead to the assumption that a Christian involvement in politics means lobbying on behalf of one's own constituency, and this can lead on to the assumption that achieving 51% of the vote gives the right for the majority to determine the way the society will operate.

In a democracy, having a majority does not grant unfettered rights over the minority, although it is sometimes interpreted in that way. The particular danger for Christians is balancing the conviction that a Christian way of life is good for all with the freedom for people to live in other ways.

The primary focus of Christian involvement has to be for the good of others. This is not to suggest that Christians ought not have rights or benefits. But Christians corporately do not live primarily for themselves as a group any more than individuals live for themselves. Jesus' commandments about love of God and neighbour have social as well as individual application.

In short, Christians must resist the politics of self-interest. Social involvement is not about securing a good deal for Christians, and it is not about maintaining Christian positions, power, status or influence. The gospel is quite clear that Christianity is not defeated by weakness, low status or even oppression. But it is defeated when it becomes a self-centred political view.

Brian Edgar