

# Editorial

The spring of 1997 will see an important general election in Britain. Whoever takes charge in Whitehall will be responsible for deciding whether, when and to what extent this country will participate in the European Monetary Union, the capstone of European integration which will determine the future of the continent for generations to come. Closer to home, the 1997 election will also tell us whether the revamped Labour Party has any real chance of governing Britain. The pundits said that it should have won in 1992 but the Tories proved extremely hard to dislodge, and there are indications that the same may be true again.

What, if anything, should Christians make of all this? Britain and other European countries have a long tradition of church-state relations, but it is one in which religion is generally kept separate from politics. This is the exact opposite of the United States, where church and state are separate but where religion and politics are intimately connected. American presidential candidates are expected to declare their religious affiliation publicly, and any number of political issues are motivated by religious beliefs of one kind or another. There is even the possibility that the Republican party may be taken over by the 'religious right', the media designation for what is properly known as the Christian coalition. This is a group of young, dedicated and politically astute individuals who are determined to bring faith issues to the fore in American life. Some of this is superficial, like the demand to restore prayer in the state schools, but there is a more serious dimension to it which may yet change the face of America and take large parts of the world along with it.

Most people in Britain, including committed Christians, find this strange and a little unsettling. We have had committed Christians in political life, and a few have not been reticent about declaring it. Margaret Thatcher, for example, made no secret of her belief that Christianity is about freedom of choice, and Tony Blair is known for his commitment to Christian socialism. Even John Major is supposed to have declared that he believes in God, and it is said that Paddy Ashdown is a committed Christian who finds it hard to decide whether he is a Protestant or a Catholic. There's a politician for you! The Church of England has always played a role in public life, though when clerics have got too embroiled in politics they have usually come to a bad end. One thinks, for example, of Cardinal Wolsey, or of Archbishop Laud. Even Thomas Cranmer, who survived all the whims and tergiversations of Henry VIII, put his foot wrong when he supported Lady Jane Grey as queen, and he paid the price for his error. As for religion and politics, Britain fought a civil war over them in the seventeenth century, and the present troubles in Northern Ireland are an unpleasant reminder of that

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legacy. Sporadic attempts to found a Christian party along the lines of the Christian Democrats in different European countries have never got beyond the lunatic fringe of British politics, nor are they likely to. The Conservative-Labour division may not be ideal, but it allows committed believers to belong to both parties, and this preserves a Christian voice in government, whichever party is in power.

The truth is that we do not want a state which actively promotes Christian beliefs any more than we want one which openly opposes them. A state which promotes Christianity will do so according to its own interests, and this will almost certainly end up corrupting the faith in one way or another. For a start, it would become impossible for anyone to disagree with the official line, and many sincere Christians would be driven into opposition as a matter of conscience. That is what happened under Charles I and it led to civil war. On the other hand, a state which was ideologically opposed to Christianity might easily drag the church into time-consuming and destructive confrontation. This happens periodically in France, where the dogma of *laïcité*, as it is called, is paraded every time there is a suggestion that religious values might somehow encroach on public life.

For all its faults, the British system is one in which Christians can promote their beliefs without coercion. There is none of the deep-seated hostility to the church which one finds in France, nor does being a Christian automatically imply that one is tied to a particular political party or programme. In political terms, we may have few friends, but we also have few enemies, and by and large this has enabled the church to get on with the task of mission without unnecessary distractions.

It is true, of course, that many church leaders have strong political views, and some of them do not hesitate to air their opinions. Recently, the Bishop of Edinburgh told readers of the *Church Times* that it was their spiritual duty to vote Labour. Such advice might appear to be unnecessary in Scotland, but it is interesting to note how many people felt the bishop was going too far. The Archbishop of York declared that the church should take an active interest in politics, but should not be tied to any one political party. He may not have realised it, but in many ways he was echoing the view of John Calvin. Calvin thought of the church as the conscience of the state, reminding it of its duty to uphold Christian values, but he believed that as an institution it should stay out of government. Much the same view is now espoused by the Roman Catholic Church, which will not allow its clergy to occupy political office. The wise clergyman will not take sides in the pulpit, though he may believe that he must preach on matters of political significance because they touch on basic Christian values.

The real problem is knowing what these values are and when it is appropriate to intervene. Bishops who complain about government housing

policy in inner city areas (the Christian value in question is ‘compassion for the poor’) have usually discovered that they have been inadequately briefed. It is not that there are no problems, but they cannot be solved by a simple appeal to unselfishness and decency, nor by the input of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money. The truth is that many of these social problems, like homelessness, are now insoluble in political terms. The infrastructure to help those in need exists but it is rejected by those who do not want its help or who are unwilling to abide by the rules. There are very few people in Britain who are destitute through no fault of their own. There is nothing that any government can do to help the rest if they do not want to help themselves. For this to happen there needs to be a spiritual transformation.

This is where the church comes in, and where all too often its leaders are found wanting. Historians have remarked that the Christian gospel is the most revolutionary force in history. The person who is born again in Christ is set free from the powers of this world, and can therefore triumph over them. When Christ comes into someone’s life, that person is transformed, and before long the effects can be seen in every aspect of his existence. When conversion takes place on a large scale, as it did in the eighteenth century, a whole nation will be changed. Even today, Britain is still to some extent living off the legacy of the evangelical revival, with its high standards of personal and social behaviour. It is true that we are rapidly running out of this capital, but as long as some memory of those times continues, this country will be a better place to live in than it would otherwise be. The real answer to the needs of the moment is conversion, and conversion will take place only if God’s people are faithful to their calling to preach the gospel. In a society where bishops and others have privileged access to the media, it is their duty to call men and women to personal repentance and faith. Far from being a pious escape into a religious fantasy world, such a call is the only practical way to obtain real and lasting social change.

Sadly, too many Christians have retreated into a fantasy world, abandoning reality for the arcane delights of General Synod or of the Toronto blessing. Why deal with original sin when you can argue over the merits of consistory courts and banns of marriage, or, if that is too taxing, fall down on the floor in helpless fits of laughter? If the church is ever going to change the world it must first get a grip on itself. If we can make a beginning at that in 1997, then perhaps we shall live to see a time when the political life of this nation is changed out of all recognition, not because bishops and clergy are standing for public office, but because men and women of God have injected a new moral and spiritual seriousness into the affairs of the nation which no aspiring politician will be able to ignore.

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