

“Why I am Not a Conservative”: Why Christians Should Revisit Hayek

(Blog posted 23rd February 2010)

Faced with growing illiberalism towards the Christian Church, Dr Stephen Copp argues that it is time for the Church to jettison its implicit support for the three main political parties. Correspondingly, the Church should abandon its equally implicit expectation that the coercive powers of the state will be used to do its job for it in social and moral matters. Instead, the Church should promote freedom and limited government and show leadership in the war of ideas.

The Nobel prize-winner Friedrich Hayek’s “The Constitution of Liberty”¹ gained some fame, not least because Margaret Thatcher reputedly banged it down on a table at a meeting in 1975, saying “This is what we believe”². This was perhaps surprising given its postscript, a short essay entitled “Why I am Not a Conservative.”³ Hayek argued that those who cherished freedom found themselves on the side of those who habitually resisted change because most progressive movements advocated encroachments on individual liberty. The problem with conservatism, however, was that by definition it could only slow down change rather than offering an alternative: it had no principles, other than being bound by a stock of ideas from the past. Conservatism had no more objection than socialism to the use of coercive or arbitrary power, if it was used for what was seen as being the right purpose. In the run up to a General Election, where the main political parties in the UK appear to espouse a growing illiberalism, there has never been a more important time to re-evaluate the significance of Hayek’s views for the Christian Church in the UK.

The last few months have seen the Church slowly begin to wake up from its slumber as to its declining influence⁴. It is important to exercise some caution over claims of decline because it would probably not be difficult to find similar claims in the mouths of Victorian or earlier clerics. But there has been a noticeable change to the context, and tenor, of such claims. The UK has experienced the most anti-Christian government perhaps in its history (the odd “God-moment” by senior politicians ignored for this purpose). This has not been militant secularism, since the government has sought to accommodate a variety of other religious or value-laden alternative world-views. Nor has government been the sole perpetrator, many of its policies have in effect been

¹ London: Routledge, 1960, 2008 reprint.

² J. Ranelagh, “Thatcher’s People” Flamingo, 1992, cited in Hayek supra rear cover.

³ Hayek, op. cit. pp. 341 – 355.

⁴ See for example, “Archbishop of Canterbury: ‘Labour treats us like oddballs’” (Daily Mail, 11th December 2009).

delegated to others. It would not be unreasonable if Christians were to believe that a wave of persecution has started in the UK. Those who would seek evidence for this could do worse than visit the web-site of the [Christian Legal Centre](#) and scroll through the list of cases in which they have acted.

In a sense none of this should be surprising. It should have been obvious with the decline in church attendance from at least the 1960s and predictions of worse⁵, that there was no reason to expect an electorate in a democracy to vote in a government sympathetic to Christian values and perhaps every reason to fear the opposite. In addition to this, the Church, probably because it retains some of the vestiges of establishment, has never appeared to see the need to lobby as hard as other minority groups to see its view taken into account in the legislative process. Just contrast, for example, the tremendous lobbying campaign over the role of corporate social responsibility in what became the *Companies Act 2006*. MPs were near inundated by postcards and other material sent to them by lobbyists and others⁶. The Church in contrast fails to marshal its best academically and professionally qualified members to advocate its cause, leaving the task all too often in the hands of amateurs.

More fundamentally, though, to return to Hayek, the Church in the UK (excluding the Roman Catholic Church which has long had cause to appreciate the issue) has failed to work through the issues of religion and state adequately if at all. A good many, if not most, Christians may quietly prefer the idea of a coercive state, provided, of course, that the state coerces people in the direction they believe is right and desirable, especially over moral issues. Accordingly, different factions have divergently thrown in their towel with the main political parties if they felt a particular party might use its power to enforce their agenda. For socially concerned Christians this aligned them to socialism, with policies such as the minimum wage, increased foreign aid – all policies requiring state coercion. For the Christian concerned with private morality, this aligned them with conservatism, over matters such as lone parenthood, marriage and so on, again policies that can involve state coercion. Given such visible disunity at a policy level, perhaps the only sign of agreement between Christians was on the need for coercive government to enact their choice policies for them. Not only was this intellectually lazy, removing the need for argument, persuasion and debate, but intellectually indefensible. Why should the Christian Church look to the state to enforce its views? And why should the state pay any attention? More

⁵ See Petre, J. “Churches ‘on road to doom if trends continue’”, Daily Telegraph, 3rd September 2005, p. 1, discussed in Copp, S.F. “Power vs Accountability: What can good Corporate Governance teach the Church?” (2005) *Faith in Business Quarterly* Vol. 9(3) 11.

⁶ See Copp, S.F. “Corporate Social Responsibility and the Companies Act 2006” (2009) *Economic Affairs* Vol. 29(4), 16 at 21.

fundamentally, what moral value do actions possess when obtained by coercion?

My central argument, therefore, is that in the face of three main parties with illiberal perspectives on issues that concern the Churches, the Churches' should avoid getting bogged down in a morass of detailed proposals where they will be inevitably portrayed as anti- progressive and illiberal but should exercise leadership in changing the relationship between Church and State. Specifically, the Church should:

- Recognise that God is the source of desirable social and moral change, for example that which followed the Methodist revival or Victorian evangelicalism, and regain its trust in the ability of God to move in the UK. This means the Church must find its spiritual direction again, not just through prayer, worship and witness but in carrying out its God-given calling to serve the sick and needy, functions from which it (amongst others) has been crowded out by too large a state (and its own indifference).
- Reject state or other coercion as the way to achieve desirable social and moral change. This means that the Church should stop expecting the state to do its work for it⁷, for example, by providing healthcare or encouraging marriage but equally that the Church should seek the removal of state interference in social and moral issues where that has no place. The Church must, therefore, reject the three main political parties and support those who favour much greater individual and corporate freedom together with much more limited government (and prepare itself for the resulting apparently less “Christian” society).
- Embrace much more robust public argument, debate and persuasion to achieve its ends. This means that the Church should fight for much greater freedom for it and its members to express their identity and persuade others of their case - regardless of who might be offended. As Lord Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, recently commented, “I think we need a tougher church ... We have got to be more outspoken⁸.”

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⁷ Or for that matter work that could be done by other spontaneous forces, such as voluntary associations and profit-making companies, outside of the state.

⁸ “Christians must toughen up and speak out: Lord Carey”: Christian Institute web-site 8th January 2010.