

The Prime Minister's Christian Message

Mr David Cameron sometimes gives the impression of a man whose intentions are as good as the fuzziness of his thinking permits. Being not very clear, he does not see that this is an important limitation. His speech of 16 December 2011, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version of the English Bible, got reported by the media because he said, as paraphrased by the official website,

we are a Christian country.

And we should not be afraid to say so.

There is no reason to doubt Mr Cameron's sincerity. This is what he thinks. But sincerity is not disconnected from authenticity. When Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* becomes furiously jealous of Polixenes, there is no doubting his sincerity, but there is still something not quite genuine about the fury. Mr Cameron's commitment to the good would improve if he thought more clearly.

When he says that "To me, Christianity, faith, religion, the Church and the Bible are all inherently involved in politics because so many political questions are moral questions," he is surely right, and when he identifies the national illness of which the rioting last summer was a symptom as "the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations".

He is against the view that we should have "a passively tolerant society" that "says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone." So Mr Cameron exhorts himself along with the rest of us "to be confident in saying something is wrong" which "is not a sign of weakness, it's a strength." Does it follow that a prime minister appointed after a democratic election has the moral authority to say what is wrong and not to leave us alone if we keep the law? Mr Cameron thinks so. But does a government appointed because it is supported by a large number of votes have such authority? Does Mr Cameron really believe *vox populi vox dei*? If so why does he need the support of the Bible?

He gives three reasons for the continued importance of the Authorised Version. The first and most prominent is that many of its phrases have become proverbial or common speech. (His secretaries should have made sure he quoted them accurately.) The second, though the phrasing is not his, is that the values which define Britain coincide with the values of the Bible. Values, not beliefs; the word *belief* is used only once in the speech.

It has to be said that his argument in support of the second contention is unlikely to convince anybody. Firstly, his list of "the values that define our country", "responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love, pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities"—quite a good list of the civic virtues—flatly contradicts his own diagnosis of the "slow motion moral collapse". Were the rioters last summer not characteristically British? along with the football crowds who have to be separated into different groups for fear of violence, Mr Cameron's friends the phone-hacking journalists, the insatiably money-loving people who pay themselves so big a proportion of the profits of public companies, the broken families and the young who think of sex as just an ordinary part of weekend of binge-drinking? These enact values that are at least as much part of the definition of Britishness as Mr Cameron's list.

Mr Cameron, that is, is asserting an ideal, not recognising a reality. All well and good, if he can be clear about it.

His third reason, "The Bible has helped to shape the values which define our country," is historically true if "our country" is replaced by "our idea of the nation", but his leading example of Bible-consistent values is unsustainable. He wants to get support from the Bible for human rights and for democracy (though at the same time, in flat contradiction but with much more support in the text, for anointed monarchs). From the Bible "We get the irrepressible foundation

for equality and human rights . . . a foundation that has seen the Bible at the forefront of the emergence of democracy, the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women.” Mr Cameron does not cite chapter and verse, and could not, because there is nothing anywhere in the sixty-six books of the Bible about any of these matters. Instead he tries to establish his position by a theological argument, as well as by examples from English history featuring the republican and regicide wing of the Presbyterians under the Commonwealth. “Every human being is of equal and infinite importance, created in the very image of God.” “Equal”, it seems, is supposed to go easily with “infinite”. But are two infinities equal? What would that mean? Equality does not follow from “created man in his own image.” The same verse goes on, “male and female created he them.” (Genesis i.27) In what sense are male and female *equal*? The one cannot give birth to children and the other cannot beget children. One of the central articles of the Christian faith is that the Lord Jesus is fully man. He took our nature upon him, praised be God! Does this mean that we are his equal? What would it mean to say so?

The authority for equality is not the Bible but the famous words in the American Declaration of Independence, far harder to understand than anything in the Bible—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .”—against which this country fought a serious and alas! unsuccessful war. They are not part of the British constitution. And the authority for this theological pronouncement, please note, is not the Bible but “a truth self-evident”, which it certainly is not. A truth self-evident must be undeniable.

The New Testament does not concern itself with equality, human rights, or slavery as an institution. Pontius Pilate was satisfied that Jesus was not a threat to the Roman *imperium* when he explained that his kingdom is not of this world. (His kingdom, not his republic.) The question of Christian influence on politics did not arise until well after the Bible was complete. Let us agree, though, that in a Christian country policies and laws will be framed in the light of Biblical teaching. The Welfare State, replacing the older customs of haphazard local charitable foundations, and individual acts or whole lives of kindness and of love, is based on “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”, and where there is no charity it malfunctions as the welfare state.

On the other hand it is now not unheard of for British legislation to contradict the Bible. There is no doubt about where the Bible stands on marriage. Marriage in Christendom has always followed the Bible; which has not prevented the enactment of “no penalty no guilt” divorce laws in much of the Western world.

We have to return to the critical question of authority.

Are the virtues Mr Cameron claims as shared values just a happy (from Mr Cameron’s point of view) coincidence of his own views with those which the Church bases on the Bible, or do our laws and policies get any moral authority they may have from conformity to the will of God? Mr Cameron seems to think the former, not the latter, but if so he faces difficulties if he is clear-minded enough to see them. The first is that his position will not be accepted by orthodox Christians, who cite the Bible as the final authority, not as a useful ally.

Secondly: to accept the Bible as a useful ally, Mr Cameron must have some criterion by which to judge the Bible. What could that be but the assertion of his list of civic values? and of human rights and equality? If he is without divine authority for these principles he will just have to support them by reasoning. Reason is not his strong point.

But with all charity and goodwill to Mr Cameron, let us say, “Seek, and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Let him think harder!

Finally: in these comments there is no original or profound thinking at all. They should have been made effortlessly in “the media”. Have they been? The politicians cannot be expected to be thoughtful when they are themselves part of a clerisy in a state of collapse.