

Hidden in plain sight: the role of faith in social change

Faith organisations must speak up about their faith and speak out on behalf of those least able to advocate for themselves, says Pat Finlow.

THE PRESIDENCY of George W Bush will be remembered for many things, but probably the least controversial are the colourful additions to the English language through his well-known “Bushisms”.

My personal favourite, coined in Arkansas on the eve of his election in November 2000, was when he stated that his opponent John McCain had “misunderestimated” him. This could perhaps be interpreted as follows: his opponent had both misunderstood him and underestimated his capacity to inspire the electorate and shape public debate.

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Misunderestimated is also a very apt way to describe how faith has been perceived by public institutions and policy makers over most of the past 50 years. The influence of faith in inspiring and shaping social change has been significantly underestimated.

I discovered this during my recent doctorate research at City University London. As a person of faith myself, I knew of countless examples of social action and community engagement at home and overseas, so I was perplexed.

It seemed that the work and impact of so many faith organisations had become hidden in plain sight. We have become unaccustomed to recognising

it, at least without a little help to bring it into focus.

This raises two questions: How or why did faith become hidden in plain sight? And what is needed to make the influence of faith visible?

To answer the first question, we need to consider a little bit of social history.

A SECULAR TURN

The 1960s saw rapid technological advances that reached into every aspect of society, even our homes: there were televisions where we could watch men landing on the moon and telephones where we could talk about

it with our friends. Increasingly, offices used newfangled computer devices. In short, people began to see that society was fast becoming modern, scientific and rational.

In response, secularisation theories emerged, which posited that the increasingly rational and scientific world being ushered in meant that anything that was not rational or that couldn't be proven would gradually move away from public life and influence. And what is more unprovable than God or religion? It was therefore believed that religious beliefs would become a private matter and religious organisations would move to the margins of society.

“MANY TURNED THEIR FAITH VOLUME DOWN IN ORDER TO GAIN AND KEEP A SEAT AT THE TABLE”



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As the 1960s progressed, these ideas became fixed and were unchallenged. In addition, the theory hardened so that, rather than being a prediction of what would probably happen, it became a proscription and shaped understanding of what should happen: religion should not have a voice in public life in a modern scientific world.

This perspective became the backdrop to academia, and consequently, the university education of those who were moving into positions of influence in the various spheres of society – media, entertainment, education, health, politics, international development and civil society.

Consequently, a whole generation of “movers and shakers” emerged who believed religion was not only irrational but also had no place in public life. A secular world view took a firm grip on the nation's consciousness and shaped how it conducted its affairs both at home and overseas.

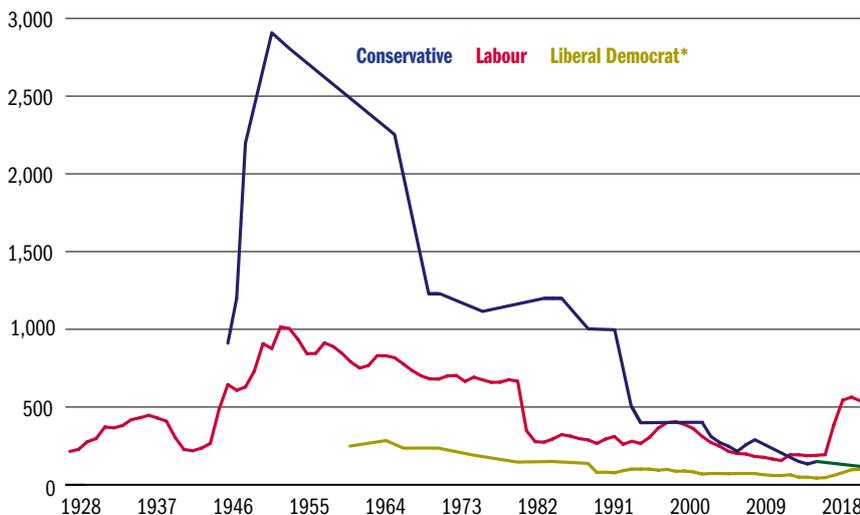
BECOMING ‘DIFFERENTLY POLITICAL’

The 1960s also ushered in a new kind of politics, which becomes evident when two graphs are viewed alongside each other (see page 40).

The first graph, from a report in the library of the House of Commons, shows party political membership since 1928. From this, we can see a peak of party membership just after the Second World War, then a consistent – even dramatic – decline since then.

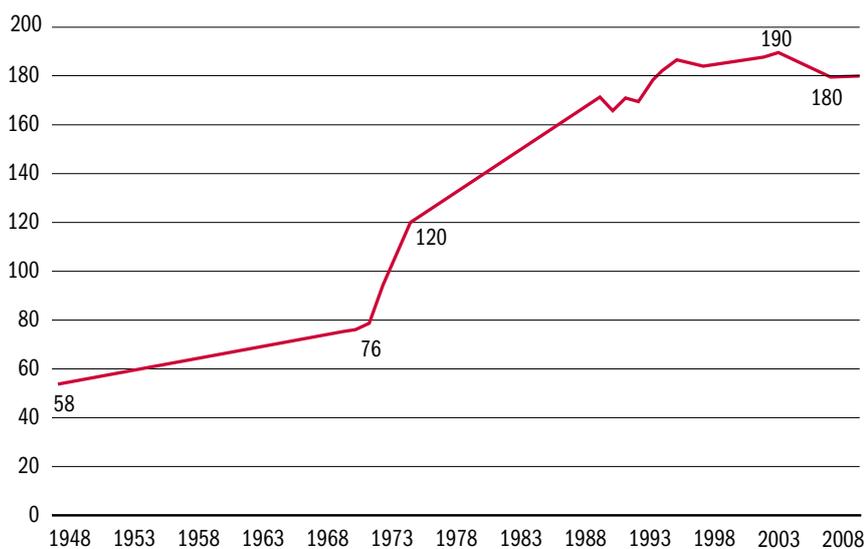
In contrast, the second graph portrays the number of registered

FIGURE 1: MEMBERSHIP OF POLITICAL PARTIES ('000s)



Notes: *Including predecessor parties. Labour party membership figures include party members and affiliated supporters, but exclude registered supporters. Source: *Membership of UK Political Parties*, House of Commons Library briefing paper

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF REGISTERED CHARITIES ('000s)



Source: *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945*, edited by M Hilton et al

charities in the UK, with an equally dramatic increase in their number since 1948.

Viewed together, these graphs tell a story of an interesting cultural shift: the public’s commitment to addressing social injustice had not diminished, but their understanding or expectation of how this would or should happen had changed. In other words, people were becoming “differently political” by outsourcing their concerns about social issues to non-government organisations (NGOs).

Meanwhile, many NGOs were coming to understand that structural change was needed as it became increasingly clear that their own efforts could never bring about change on the scale needed. So, in the 1960s and 1970s they began to explore ways to encourage structural change, which were the green shoots of later advocacy programmes. In consequence, civil society gradually became more vocal as people and groups emerged who were ready and willing to stand up and speak out on a range of causes.

MUTING OF FAITH

Faith organisations wanted to be heard too, but as this was a time when religion was seen as irrational, many began to turn their faith volume down, almost to zero, in order to gain and keep a seat at the table.

So the voice of faith became muted: the vocabulary of public debate and the nature of public discourse became stripped of religion, even avoiding references to the faith roots of organisations involved. All of this served to confirm the secularisation theories that predicted that the influence of religion would diminish. It had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If something is deemed irrelevant and outmoded, there is little need to know anything about it, and as a consequence, understanding of or knowledge about faith and its influence also declined. In the public domain, the assumption of irrelevance, combined with the muting of a faith voice, contributed to the misunderestimation of the influence of faith in social change.

The impact of this was neatly summarised in a question put to the director of Christian Aid a number of years ago: “What do you do that isn’t just Oxfam with hymns?”

A perception of faith had emerged that assumed it was merely a lifestyle choice, in the same manner as supporting a football team is a lifestyle choice. Footy fans may attend matches at the weekend with those of similar mind or engage in community singing extolling the virtues of their team – but no one thinks this would affect how they lived for the rest of the week. Certainly not in how they conducted themselves when volunteering or working at an NGO.

Consequently, faith-based organisations were frequently seen as little more than religiously branded tribute bands to Oxfam. The idea that faith could influence the behaviours of individuals and consequently the working practices of NGOs was, to all intents and purposes, lost.

So, to turn to my second question: if faith is hidden in plain sight then what is needed to make it visible? The answer is curiosity combined with a more contemporary understanding



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of religion. One that incorporates insight into how faith is expressed on a day-to-day basis and that isn't preoccupied with doctrines, rituals and practices in places of worship.

So if we now apply this curiosity, what does it tell us about how faith is outworked? It would be so helpful if the benefits (or drawbacks) of faith organisations were uniform or universal. But unfortunately they are not. They are very much contextual, depending on time, place, the issue being addressed, the particular faith being considered and even the different expressions within that faith.

My own research uncovered a wide range of overlapping and reinforcing factors. While some are quite ordinary and everyday, others are less tangible or measurable. In many cases, the difference will be a combination of factors, many of which are also found in secular organisations, such as compassion, but then bolstered by spiritual values and a sense of divine calling, and catalysed by access to practical resources.

To illustrate this, let's imagine someone called Susan who, like many people, feels deeply concerned about food poverty in the UK. Let's say that Susan is a Christian and knows that the Bible speaks about the importance of practical care for those in need, so her concern to do something contains an additional layer: a divine imperative.

As Susan is a member of a church, she is able to put this concern into practice by making a proposal for a foodbank to the church's governing body – perhaps using one of the church's Sunday offerings to provide finance and co-opting a side room as the food store. She mobilises others in the congregation to help by speaking at a Sunday service and explaining the Biblical underpinning to this new project. The church congregation now shares her perception of this "divine imperative" and a foodbank is launched.

During the past five to ten years, such faith-based projects have become increasingly visible, which has prompted curiosity within public institutions, which have begun to

wonder whether there has been a gap in their strategic thinking. Consequently, reports and research have been commissioned as policymakers and practitioners alike ponder both the merits and drawbacks of working with and through faith organisations.

FINDING THEIR VOICE AGAIN

When people speak of "finding their voice", this concerns a renewed confidence in expressing who they are and in speaking up about things that matter to them.

The most noble and honourable use of our voice is when we speak up for others – to lend our voice to those who have none and those who lack any opportunity to speak up about their own situation, or to bring about change in their circumstances.

This is a moral obligation from which we can't turn away. And it is why the muting of the voice of faith in the public square matters. Until faith-based organisations find their voice, the contribution of faith organisations will continue to be underestimated.

But, if change is happening and people's lives are improving, does it matter whether God or His followers get any of the credit?

On the one hand, no it doesn't. It's thrilling when any person is helped or an injustice is overturned, no matter who was involved. But when strategising for future change, for example when developing public policy, planning campaigns or evaluating funding applications, it's just plain daft to ignore any group that could bring leverage, or any added value to the cause. It would be like leaving Usain Bolt in the changing rooms when organising a team for a relay race. No matter how good the others are, you want to assemble the best team possible. Especially when the welfare and lives of the most vulnerable are at stake.

Therefore, it is vital that faith organisations find their voice again: not only to reverse the misestimation of faith, but also to advocate for those least able to speak for themselves. ●

The inaugural Faith Charities Forum will be held in London on 12 September. Find out more at civilsociety.co.uk/events