

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Have I got news for you

Leap years promise two things without fail—the Olympic Games and the American presidential elections. Which of these is the more extravagant sporting event is a matter of debate, but one thing is certain. In both, the preparations start early and the results are often close. The main difference between them is that in the former you have to be young and fit, whereas in the latter you have to be older and American-born. But either way, you need to have rich backers, lots of stamina and your eyes firmly fixed on the prize.

The irony of this is that the Olympic Games were intended to foster peace among the nations of the world, but soon became intensely politicised, whereas the American presidential race was never meant to be a sport, but has been transformed into one both by the media circus that surrounds it and by the general perception of modern politicians in most Western countries. Anyone who doubts the close link between sport and politics need only look back to the London Games of 2012, where the clear winner was Boris Johnson, the city's mayor. Mr Johnson's skills as an Olympic gold medallist are about as great as his qualifications to be prime minister, yet for a few weeks he managed to persuade Britain and the wider world that he was both. The man who first rose to prominence on the BBC's satirical news programme *Have I got news for you* managed to walk off with all the prizes.

On the other side of the Atlantic meanwhile, the presidential candidates were vying with each other to see which of them could better pretend to be a true man of the people. The contest was between the aloof Mr Obama, whose boredom with having to meet the general public was only too obvious at times, or the super-rich Mr Romney, whose attitude to the poor was similar to the one (falsely) attributed to Marie Antoinette: 'If there is no bread, let them eat cake.' As more than one commentator remarked, the two candidates were neck-and-neck at the final countdown, but only because both were competing for the bottom rung of the ladder. It was not a case of the best man winning but the worst, and people were finding it difficult to decide which of the two deserved

that honour. In the end, as the *Economist* predicted, Americans went for the devil they knew, but it was a close call and few people are really happy about the result.

For Christians, the American elections always have a particular interest because the United States is the only major country in the world where the candidates' religious beliefs are taken seriously and can make a difference to their chances of being elected. Almost everywhere else, a candidate's faith is either taken for granted and ignored (as in most strongly Catholic or Orthodox countries) or else is regarded with suspicion. In Britain, several recent prime ministers have been churchgoers, but nobody can say for sure what that means in terms of belief or what impact it has had on their policies. Margaret Thatcher once famously declared that Christianity was about 'freedom of choice,' which suggests to the theologically literate that the word 'election' was not in her vocabulary—an odd omission for a politician!

Tony Blair was a liberal member of the Church of England who became an equally liberal Roman Catholic after stepping down from office, proving only that liberal Christianity can find a home anywhere and is not bothered by theological details. Gordon Brown was a 'son of the manse' which was supposed to mean something to those who chose to believe, but nobody is sure exactly what. Most recently, David Cameron has let it be known that the Church of England (to which he openly belongs) needs to reinvent itself in the same way that his own Conservative Party has done—by hopping onto the gay bandwagon and reinterpreting the Gospel accordingly. The idea that a religious institution should copy a political party seems perfectly natural to him—after all, was not Jesus himself hailed as the son of David? In Britain, most people still expect their leaders to have high moral standards—in this respect, the country is quite different from France or Italy—but British Christians tend to wince if they start talking about their 'faith.'

Not so in America. Barack Obama, who is widely believed to be a Muslim because his father was one and he himself was brought up in Indonesia, has to keep reassuring people that he is a Christian, even though it is not altogether clear what church he belongs to. Mitt Romney, on the other hand, is a dedicated believer—in Mormonism. The awful thing is that so many Evangelical Christians prefer that to Mr Obama's vague liberal Christianity, failing to see

that what they are really doing is persuading most people that religious belief is an absurdity. After all, if you are happy to vote for someone who believes that Joseph Smith received golden plates from heaven, with a secret message on them that only he could decipher, and are doing so mainly because the man who subscribes to that belief system wants to lower taxes and reduce the impact of big government, what difference does faith make? In Mr Romney's case, the less of it he acts on, the better! Perhaps the supreme irony of this is that those who think that Mr Obama is a Muslim do not realise how similar Mormonism is to Islam, with its belief in a latter-day prophet with his own sacred book, the importance of angels, polygamy and a general recognition that Jesus was a godly man whose teaching now has to be supplemented by something better.

In many ways the chickens have come home to roost for American Evangelicals. Having fallen for the view that the Gospel and conservatism of the Romney type go together, they have now been faced with a candidate who preaches social conservatism but who openly professes another religion which regards itself as an improvement on Christianity. It is unfortunately true that there is a vocal section of American Evangelical opinion that is susceptible to the allure of theological nonsense—dispensationalism, for example, or so-called 'creationism'—so their willingness to tolerate a fantasy like Mormonism is not as out-of-character as it might seem. The sad thing is that the Evangelical centre is not strong enough to stand up to the far right and propose a sensible alternative. There are plenty of American Evangelicals who want universal health care and strict gun control—things that are taken for granted almost everywhere else—but they are denounced as 'liberals' and their voice is not heard by the broad mass of Evangelical voters. The 2012 presidential election has revealed the hollowness of American Evangelicalism to an unprecedented degree and shown the rest of the world why it is incapable of making a serious impact on national policy.

Of course it is easy to cast stones at others without considering our own failings, and we must acknowledge that for all their naivete, American Evangelicals are much more influential than their British or European counterparts are. Unfortunately, this is almost certainly because the numbers of the latter are much smaller and not because their views are significantly more enlightened. To take one obvious example, British opposition to the European Union and to immigration (which is now mostly from the EU) does not spring from Evangelical

sources but even so, it is shared by a significant segment of Evangelical opinion, perhaps even by the majority. Most British Evangelicals seem to be noticeably more at home in the right wing of the Conservative party than anywhere else on the political spectrum, and although this is understandable in some respects, it is also dangerous.

It is true that right-wing Conservatives are the only group likely to stand up against social reforms like the proposed introduction of gay marriage, and on issues like that, Christians have no choice but to side with them. But there is more to Christianity than opposition to homosexual practice and it is by no means certain that one party has all the right answers. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear to many people that no party has any real programme that can get to grips with the problems facing us today. They have all promised us the moon in the past, and having failed to deliver, they now blame each other for not having achieved the impossible. No wonder that the average person is disenchanted and can no longer see what difference voting actually makes. It is increasingly clear to almost everyone that whoever takes power next will only deliver more of the same and the results will be just as dire as they were under the previous government.

In a situation like this, neither the Church of England nor the Evangelical movement can afford to tie itself to any one political party or grouping. All human beings are sinful, and although government was instituted by God, it was given in order to restrain the impact of human sinfulness, not as a means of ushering in a millenarian utopia. A week before the recent presidential elections in the USA, the public was reminded by the devastation caused by Superstorm Sandy that there are things that affect our lives more profoundly than politics, and that no government can control them. It is part of the Church's mission to point this out and to propose a solution that the secular world cannot offer—salvation in and through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Only by repenting of our sins and being born again to a new life is it possible to deal with the problems and challenges that face us, and if we lose sight of this truth, we are doomed.

The decline of the Western world has been a theme of much political writing since the 1920s, but in the past few years it has gained added weight with the rise of China to global prominence, and perhaps eventually to world dominance.

What is not always realised is that China's great economic leap forward is being paralleled by an equally great spiritual leap. A country that has never really had a religion is now discovering Christianity and turning to it at an amazing rate. Nobody knows how many Christians there are in China, but figures as high as 130 million are commonly mentioned, and everyone is certain that the numbers are growing exponentially. These are people who know where they are going and who have the faith to believe that they can get there.

For some time now it has been fashionable to point out that the Christian church is moving in to the Global South, where it is finding a new centre of gravity that is bound to affect the way that Gospel mission will be done in the next hundred years. There is no doubt that most of sub-Saharan Africa is now at least nominally Christian and that there has been a significant increase of Protestant believers in Latin America, but these things have to be seen in perspective. The Western hemisphere was colonized from Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and although the countries there have developed characteristics of their own, they essentially belong to the wider world of European Christendom. Much the same must be said about black Africa, which is largely the product of nineteenth and twentieth century European colonialism and dependent on Western models in both church and state.

China is a different matter. European influence there has been strong, to be sure, but it has never been able to overturn classical Chinese civilisation. In particular, the missionary work of the Western churches, dedicated and intense as it was, was relatively unsuccessful. When the communists took over in 1949, the missionaries left and most people thought that Christianity would soon be snuffed out. Instead, the exact opposite has happened. The growth of the church in China is a native phenomenon, owing little or nothing to outside influence and developing along traditional Chinese lines. If China becomes a Christian country in the next generation, it will be quite different from any other former 'mission field,' with consequences as yet unforeseeable. Ironically, the same week that saw the American elections also saw the choice of a new Chinese leader, but it was a very different process. The church will probably reflect that and our grandchildren will find themselves living with a kind of Christianity superficially similar but profoundly different from anything we now know. For better or for worse, this may be the way that things are heading, and it is high time that we wake up and realise it.

Instead, Western countries go on living in denial—denial that they are in decline and denial that their abandonment of the faith that made them great will have any serious consequences for their well-being. The media, and even governments, target the remaining defenders of those values, as the absurdly unjust prosecutions of supposedly ‘homophobic’ bed-and-breakfast owners in Britain have recently demonstrated, while the church buries its head in the sand. This is nothing new of course. Much the same happened in ancient Israel, when affluence lulled God’s people into complacency and they were eventually carted off into exile. Could such a thing happen to us? Nobody wants to believe it, but as the BBC would put it, *have I got news for you*. Not comic satire this time, but hard reality—God honours those who honour him and rejects people who call him Lord but who behave in ways that deny the claim. Let us hope and pray that we shall wake up before it is too late and return to the Lord our God before the terrible wrath of his justice reduces us to the state that we seem bent on choosing for ourselves.

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