

Can the Far Right claim to be Christian?

Sermon in the chapel at Churchill College, Cambridge
by Nigel Cooper

Lev 19.33-34
Luke 10.30-36
Ps 121

Can the Far Right claim to be Christian? Of course they can – and do – and have done down the ages. The question might be better put as “How sound are their claims?”

These far right Christians stand towards one end of a Christian spectrum and draw comfort from the way many more moderate Christians hold conservative views on social issues such as gender, sexuality and the role of women. I think Christians should look carefully in the mirror and ask, if our conservative views are so attractive to such people, might we be mistaken in our understanding of our faith.

I hope it will not come as a surprise when I say I think such conservative Christianity is wrong. I do so with concern, also recognising that I have beams in my own eyes¹. I also think it is one of the reasons for the decline in Christianity as people correctly, I think, rightly turn away from such an understanding of morality.

You may strongly disagree with me and you are welcome to do so. I no more expect Christians to agree with me than I expect non-Christians to do so. This is an inclusive chapel where everyone is welcome. To keep it this way we must speak graciously and listen well to each others. It is especially incumbent on me to model this, not least in sermons. Please challenge me when I get this wrong – as I shall.

The diversity of Christian views reciprocates with the diversity of how Christians read Scripture. A major strand of conservative thought relies on the belief that there is only one way to read the Bible, which is that every word is straightforwardly true. But no text is ever read without a reading grid to produce a meaning. These grids work in several ways such as the connotations given to words, which passages to highlight and to use to interpret others, and the questions we bring to a text. Reading grids are social constructions of the communities we belong to and come with a tradition behind them, although we each adapt them in our own way as we think fit. We each have a choice over what reading grid to use, even if only over which community to belong to whose grid we adopt in order to belong. Although this choice of membership is sociologically constrained, I believe we remain morally and intellectually accountable for our choices.

I have come to this point through a linguistic argument, but it coincides with the good Anglican theology of the tripod stool that stems from Hooker, the Elizabethan divine of the sixteenth century – this also echoes the stool from which we probably also get our ‘tripos’. The three legs are scripture, reason and tradition. Methodists, in their appropriation of Anglicanism, have interestingly split reason into reason and experience in their Wesleyan Quadrilateral, thus emphasising the current role of the Holy Spirit in directing our thought. Although slightly differently expressed, these three legs remain in the current Declaration of Assent that all Church of England clergy are required to make.

1 Mt 7.3-5

And then, Scripture itself models how to read itself. The New Testament authors demonstrated great freedom in interpreting, ignoring or contradicting portions of the Bible as they received it.

You may notice how I have constructed my model of reading Scripture from all three legs of the stool! I did that without realising it until I had done it.

Now, a personal story. My student theological studies made clear that passages of Scripture can be at variance with each other. In the early years of my ministry I told people that I did not know how to reconcile these but that I trusted that I would be guided on how to do so down the line. I now believe that I have been led to the position that incompatibilities are there to help train us to use our Spirit-given moral sense and that we are ignoring God if we do not decide that some passages are just wrong. They may be scientifically wrong, historically wrong or, pertinently, morally wrong. I find this has strengthened my faith and my use of Scripture. I work out of the centre of the biblical witness to the death of Jesus. That is where we most clearly see the heart of God. My test is, am I preaching Christ crucified?

Moving on from this important methodological introduction, what about the far right? I suggest that the far right have these features mostly in common:

- A nationalism that is anti-immigration and that slides into clear racism
- Hostility to other marginal groups, especially towards diversity of sexuality and gender, including misogyny
- Denial of anthropogenic climate change and the protection of nature more generally
- Authoritarianism and coercion, including the misapplication of free-speech claims
- A positive attitude to wealth and wealth inequality.

I do not have time to tackle all of these, so I shall concentrate on the first two: migration, where there is much Christian consensus, and sexuality, where there isn't.

J.D. Vance, the current vice president of the USA, apparently from memory justified American practice over immigrants, Ice and all, by reference to Catholic teaching that we owed our greatest duty to those closest to us. On being pressed, he referred to the *Ordo Amoris*. This might be literally translated 'order of love' which pictures a sort of bullseye approach to moral duty. Our moral concern begins with us at the centre, extends to our family, our neighbourhood, our nation and, only then, to the world.²

He was indirectly rebuked by Pope Francis in his letter to American bishops. *Ordo* was not 'order of concern' but 'rightly ordered concern'. Yes, there is a particular duty to our dependents and to our physical neighbours, but this must be balanced with other factors such as degree of need.

Now, when we turn to Scripture, we can find plenty of passages that support an ethnic centred morality. The most extreme are the divine commands to the Israelites to invade Palestine and drive out its inhabitants (or even kill them all). Surely these texts influence the policy of the Israeli government. I think it important to notice that, while we might excuse Iron-Age Israelites because the past is a foreign country, God cannot be so easily excused. These passages are a moral outrage and cannot express the moral will of God. While, in the New Testament there are some key antisemitic texts, perhaps the worst is in Matthew where the crowd is reported as saying, "His blood be upon us and on our children."³ Yet, alongside these, in the Hebrew Bible there are many passages instructing the Israelites to care for the aliens amongst them. Today's reading is just one example. Which do we give priority to? Does not our moral sensitivity give a clear answer?

² ['Ordo Amoris' according to JD Vance and Pope Francis](#) The Catholic Herald

³ Mt 27.25

In his letter⁴, Pope Francis referred to an earlier exposition in an encyclical letter⁵ he had given of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we also heard in the service.

There can be contrarian readings of this parable. Famously, Mrs Thatcher once claimed it justified pro-wealth policies⁶. She pointed out that the Samaritan could not have paid the innkeeper to care for the wounded man if he had not been rich. This is a bizarre fixation on a peripheral detail. Would the Samaritan have passed by if he had not been rich? Would not a poor Samaritan also have stopped and done what she could, perhaps calling friends to carry the stranger to her house so that she could care for him herself?

The powerful message of the parable is not just that we should care for those in need amongst us, whatever their ethnicity; not just that, but the even more challenging message that the host community needs the neighbourly care of the aliens amongst them. This is so evident today in, for example, care work in Britain⁷.

Nevertheless, I have a lot of sympathy for Reform voters. It is easy to see why white British people, observing their world crumbling around them, are tempted to blame immigrants as competitors for housing, jobs and access to medical treatment. I am just surprised by how easily they have been taken in by conmen. Blaming immigrants is a story fed by Farage and his wealthy backers both to divert attention from the fact the prime cause of Britain's woes is our extreme inequality of wealth⁸ and from their programme of deregulation to allow them to grab further wealth and power. On inequality, three years ago researchers at Greenwich University⁹ calculated from the Sunday Times 'Rich List' that the top fifty families held as much wealth as the total wealth of the bottom fifty percent of the population.

Where would the Nazarene on the cross stand on welcoming the stranger?

Now to gender, sexuality and the treatment of women. There are well-known passages in Leviticus and Paul's Romans that condemn homosexuality. The assumed-patriarchy of the Hebrew Bible is reinforced in the New Testament epistles with explicit teaching on the subservience of women and their duty to obey their husbands. It is troubling that, from one article I have read¹⁰, that Reform's policies to increase the birthrate seem to focus on tying women more into their husbands and their role in the home.

There are no screamingly obvious counter-texts to these in the Bible, but I still don't take these passages as, forgive me, gospel. I shall take a different tack to address these issues.

Before I start, though, I want to say that I began my journey from a conservative position. I have completely moved away from it, I believe, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, though encounters and experiences, rather as St Peter in Acts is shown that Gentiles too can be full members of the Church without embracing Judaism.

4 [Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishops of the United States of America \(10 February 2025\)](#)

5 [Fratelli tutti \(3 October 2020\)](#)

6 [Margaret Thatcher: 'No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.' — The Socratic Method](#)

7 [Drop in overseas workers is 'car crash' for UK hospitals and care homes, say experts | Nursing | The Guardian](#)

8 Pickett, K., Gauhar, A., Wilkinson, R. & Sahni-Nicholas, P. (2024). The Spirit Level at 15. London: The Equality Trust. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-de9s-7k93>

9 [Greenwich Academic Literature Archive - The good life at the top: analysing The Sunday Times Rich List 1989-2023](#)

10 [Yes, Britain needs more babies – but Reform's nasty plans for women won't help | Polly Toynbee | The Guardian](#)

I begin with an assertion that came to me many years ago. God speaks to the world through the Church; and speaks to the Church through the world¹¹. It is the challenge from the world that has led most of the Church to rethink its traditional stance on marriage etc.. For example, ‘obey’ has been excised from the marriage service. The world has forced the Church to look back at its tradition and discover seeds and green shoots that had been there all along and which were waiting for discovery and joyful exploration. It began with women asserting their basic equality with men and the slow recognition of this by men. Slow! Can you believe it? When I first came up to Cambridge in 1972, Churchill, King’s and Clare broke the mould and admitted women that year. The President of Queens’, my college, said Queens’ would only admit women over his dead body. Can anyone seriously suggest we turn the clock back on this? Incredibly, yes! The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Sarah Mullally, has been receiving massive trolling – as has the new MP for Gorton and Denton, Hannah Spencer – some of the archbishop’s trolls is just vile sexism, but there are a lot of serious postings, I understand, who refuse to accept the episcopal ministry of a woman. Is this because women clergy are obviously worse than men? In many ways the mess the Church of England is now in is down to the men! Theologically, the Holy Spirit has spoken, as she did at the struggle over the admission of Gentiles in the first generation of Christians, as laid out in the pages across the New Testament.

Next, all the people who are not straight or who are non-binary, all those whose sexual orientation differs from the traditional heterosexual assumptions. It is in *my* lifetime that homosexual activity ceased to be a criminal offence. It is not surprising that a combination of mental conflict, plus the necessity to practice in dark and hidden places led to some morally awful behaviours. But now, in the relative freedom of same-sex relationships – I must emphasise how difficult it remains to be a same sex couple still – we witness the flourishing of secure, committed, loving relationships that are quite the equal of heterosexual ones. “Some of my best friends are gay,” can so easily be a smokescreen for underlying prejudice, but I make it as an assertion of joy and delight, because I have seen in them the work of the Holy Spirit bringing her fruit of love, joy and peace.

It is where this has been denied, either by Church rules and teaching, or by their internalisation and the mental anguish this brings, that is the source of the horrendous cases of sexual abuse, especially by the clergy. Repression of our sexual orientation, which itself might be called god-given as it is not a life-choice but a self-discovery, leads to the impurity that is the opposite to the Spirit’s fruits.

Thirdly to Trans. Here we are much more in the early stages of cultural change. I have no doubt that, from what we have seen in the cases of women and gays, trans people can also called to their way of life by God. Some of students at ARU I have worked most closely with have transitioned. What a hard journey it is! They need all the support and encouragement they can get from the rest of us.

If the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, is right, human societies are terrified by “pollution”, by things not being in their proper place. Societies’ understandings of the gods, or something more nebulous in our own secular culture, dreads divine retribution on the whole society if these taboos are broken. It is not a random matter that in Leviticus the prohibitions against same sex relations are shortly followed with allied pollution-prohibitions against the wearing of garments of mixed materials¹². They are the same family of taboo. The prophet of Nazareth overturned that understanding of God. His god welcomed people thought to be sinners, put the last first and the first last, healed the sick in a culture where it was sometimes thought it was a just punishment for unknown sin¹³.

11 This is not the time or place to make more of the Church’s role in speaking the things of God to the world. Just to say, it is a key focus of my own ministry to try to do this.

12 Lev 18.22 and 19.19

13 Jn 9.1-3

There is a particularly terrifying passage in Mark. The doctors of the law were the strictly religious traditionalists who thought they were being faithful to God by keeping to the letter of the law. Yet their faithfulness to the law hindered them from recognising the Spirit of God before them. Hence they accused Jesus of being possessed by the prince of devils, specifically because of his healings but also his wider ministry to the social pariahs. In Mark's account, Jesus responds with this most chilling statement.

'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin'— for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'¹⁴

If they couldn't recognise the patent goodness of the healing in front of them, then 'God help them'!

So, to fellow Christians, wherever they are, I appeal to them, if you still hold the traditional views, as I once did, do we not need to ask ourselves whether, in maintaining the traditional teaching on gender and sexuality are we not in danger of missing the signs of the Spirit? Are we calling evil the liberating work of the Holy Spirit evident in the love, joy and peace in people's lives and relationships? I remind you, the letter kills, the Spirit gives life¹⁵.

The maxim is: By their fruits you shall know them¹⁶.

14 Mk 3.28-30

15 2 Cor 3.6

16 Mt 7.16