

God is not a Conservative.....

October 2000

by Sir Brian Mawhinney MP

published in Conservatism magazine

Sir Brian Mawhinney MP used the first of his columns for Conservatism magazine to reflect on our God who transcends party politics.

In the early 1980s, the Conservative Party organised a Conference at Westminster Chapel entitled "Conservatism and Christianity". It caused a lot of interest. On the day we had about 250 in attendance along with television cameras, radio mikes and journalists.

The Rt Rev Graham Leonard, then Bishop of London, was the morning's keynote speaker and I chaired this initial session.

When the Conference settled I started with the words "God is not a Conservative, a Socialist, a Liberal or a Social Democrat (as it was in those days). God is God and it is with that truth that we start our Conference this morning."

The Bishop was excellent and the morning went well. Driving back to the Commons, I listened to the BBC lunchtime news. Relatively high on its agenda was a report on our Conference, in which the newscaster told the nation; "A Tory MP admitted (my emphasis) this morning that God is not a Conservative".

No full quote. No explanation. Just a politically inspired distortion of my message. The incident tells you more about the BBC than it does about God, me or the Conservative Party!

I have been asked by the Editor to write a few articles looking at the interface between Christianity and politics, primarily from the Christian perspective. So we had better set the scene by affirming right at the beginning that God, the Creator, the Redeemer, transcends Party politics and its labels.

If God is infinite in time and space, He cannot be constrained by party political consideration, dogma or ideology. You may think this so obvious that it hardly needs saying, yet too many Christians, with an interest in politics, seem to find it hard to prioritise between being a part of the Body and being a member of the Party.

Christians in Parliament

Indeed Members of Parliament frequently have less problem with this issue than do many churchgoers.

MPs take part with those of different political instincts, in the varied activities of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship, without stress or difficulty.

I think of Ron Lewis, for many years the Member for Carlisle. He and I were very different. He left school early and worked in the mining industry. I went to grammar school, then on to university and medical school teaching.

We became good friends and, more importantly, good Christian friends. From time to time we would read the Bible and pray together, but when the division bell rang Ron would join his Labour colleagues in one voting lobby, while I joined Conservatives in the other. It would never have occurred to either of us to claim that our shared God and personal Saviour would go exclusively with one of us to the detriment of the other.

Many years ago a book was written which challenged us Christians about the reality and breadth of our spiritual experience. It had a wonderful title - Your God is too Small [J B Phillips]. When it comes to the relationship between politics and faith there is a tendency to fall into that mind set. We are Conservatives and Christians - and because we are comfortable

in both roles, we make the assumption that God must be on our side. We dismiss, or more often deny, the inconvenient thought that others in different political parties think and behave in a similar fashion.

By doing so we are all guilty of diminishing God in our own experience, though not in His reality.

So how is it that Christians can be found in all the main political parties? Well, we are hugely fortunate in this country. The ends of our mainstream political activity are largely agreed, for they stem from our Judaeo-Christian heritage. We all believe in the dignity of human beings, personal freedom, choice, security, safety, work, good health and education and much more besides.

Our political heat is generated as we argue over the best way to achieve those ends. The means of our political activity. On those "means" the authoritative, moral and ethical nature of our God is silent. Christians, with others, can honestly disagree on how best to achieve agreed ends without compromising their faith.

If this were a sermon I would conclude by saying "so my first point is that our God transcends party politics".

Later we will explore the liberation and challenge which this makes possible for His people.

If God is infinite in time and space, He cannot be constrained by party political consideration, dogma or ideology. You may think this so obvious that it hardly needs saying, yet too many Christians, with an interest in politics, seem to find it hard to prioritise between being a part of the Body and being a member of the Party.