

PROTESTANTS AND POPE FRANCIS

A View from outside the Roman Catholic Tradition

Elizabeth A. Hoare

I HAD NOT GOT VERY FAR with reading *Evangelii gaudium* before being struck by the thought that this could have been written by one of the Nonconformist preachers I had been used to hearing as I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. The topics, tone and language all resonated. The opening words, ‘the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus’ (n.1) are what every evangelical Protestant testifies to believing and wants the whole world to hear and believe too. Pope Francis’s ‘offer of salvation’, ‘set free from sin’ (n.1), the warnings about the dangers of consumerism both to those inside and those outside the Church, the invitation to a ‘personal encounter with Jesus Christ’ (n.3)—for everyone, with no exceptions—are all familiar phrases to worshippers in the Protestant evangelical Church. Until recently, we may have talked more about ‘evangelism’ than ‘evangelization’ but the vision of *Evangelii gaudium* is clear, and a vision that is shared.

Francis talks of sharing a faith that is life-transforming: something that affects every part of existence and every moment. This is not a faith to be kept for Sundays or reduced to moralising, and it evokes a resounding Yes from the evangelical and charismatic parts of the contemporary Protestant Church. Indeed it is noteworthy that the emphasis on evangelization has been an important unifying factor. Thus the bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Steven Croft—who has called on his diocese to explore what it means to be more Christlike for the sake of the world, adopting the strapline ‘more contemplative, more compassionate, more courageous’—wrote in his blog in 2019 about the way he had been influenced by *Evangelii gaudium*. He commented:

Every member ... would benefit from reading at least the opening chapters of *The Joy of the Gospel* in preparation for General Synod ... to catch a sense of the wonder of Christ and of the message of life entrusted to the Church.¹

I am writing as an evangelical Protestant, now from within the Anglican tradition rather than the Free Church, but all those to whom I have spoken are agreed that, with a few exceptions, most Protestants are aware of Pope Francis's priorities, they warm to them and are glad that he is so open about them. In particular, his desire that all should hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and know that they are included in the invitation, his commitment to caring for the earth, his authenticity and his apparent radical approach to the traditional image of the Roman Catholic Church all stand out as deeply attractive.

For charismatic Protestants there are further positive aspects to this Pope, especially his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, his exuberant and evident personal joy in knowing Jesus Christ, and the way he has reached out to them publicly and in affirmative ways. Both these groups will be reassured that Pope Francis is steeped in biblical reflection—as both *Evangelii gaudium* and *Laudato si'* demonstrate, with scriptural quotations and allusions on practically every page. These are the two documents with which most Protestants are likely to be familiar, and which they may possibly have read—a notable point in itself, since most papal writings would pass unnoticed among ordinary lay people.

Warmth towards Pope Francis does not necessarily extend to the rest of the Roman Catholic Church, of course. The cover story of the influential magazine *Christianity Today* in December 2014, for example, which was enthusiastic about the recently elected pontiff, noted that while people were 'overwhelmingly positive' about Pope Francis, they were generally negative about the Catholic Church.² For some Protestants, especially evangelicals steeped in the Reformation tradition, the papacy will always be problematic, whoever holds the office, simply because it is Roman Catholic. No matter what the Pope says or does, being Roman Catholic is too damaging in their minds for him to have any positive impact. The continued dominance of reformed theology in this group

¹ Steven Croft, 'Rethinking Evangelism', *Diocese of Oxford: Bishop Steven's Blog*, at <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/rethinking-evangelism/>, accessed 10 September 2020.

² R. R. Reno, 'Pop Francis: Why Everyone Loves the Pope', *Christianity Today* (2 December 2014), available at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/december/pop-francis.html>, accessed 10 September 2020 (paywall).

that traces its roots to the sixteenth century ensures that Catholicism remains the enemy.

That said, there are plenty of Protestants who might have been expected to be negative towards anything with the tag Roman Catholic, but who are on record as saying positive things about this Pope, from the very start of his papacy. Timothy George, for example, the dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in the USA and author of *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, points to his name as a bridge between Catholics and Protestants.³ Rick Warren, an influential US church leader with a following in the UK, went on record as describing Francis as ‘our new Pope’ (emphasis mine).⁴ Luis Palau, seen by some as successor to Billy Graham, and therefore highly respected as an effective evangelist, has drawn attention to the Pope’s personal lifestyle as an important reason why evangelicals respect him.⁵ Other prominent names in the charismatic evangelical world who are content to be known as having fraternised with the Pope include John Arnott (of ‘Catch the Fire’ in Toronto), Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland.

An equally big hurdle for a few Protestants to get over, especially very conservative evangelicals, is the fact that Francis is a Jesuit. The Jesuits were traditionally seen as the ‘shock troops’ of the Counter-Reformation, created expressly to win back the supposed ‘heretics’ who had embraced the ideas of Luther and other sixteenth-century reformers instead of remaining loyal to the mother Church. The Jesuits were regarded as ruthless and sinister then, and that view has not changed among such Protestant evangelicals.

The fact that the Jesuits are also regarded as those who sit on the margins, however, has an appeal for certain Protestants. St Ignatius of Loyola himself offered the insight that the truth of God resides not just in the teaching of authority, but rather in an interplay between tradition and human experience, so many people have warmed to Francis’s recognition of the vital link between faith and culture. Protestant churches, like Roman Catholic ones, are experiencing an alarming haemorrhage of worshippers. Many of the people who leave church are not departing

³ See Timothy George, ‘Our Francis Too’, *Christianity Today* (4 June 2013), available at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/june/our-francis-too.html>, accessed 10 September 2020 (paywall).

⁴ Rick Warren, interview with Raymond Arroyo, *The World Over* (EWTN, 14 April 2014).

⁵ ‘Why It Matters that Pope Francis Drinks Mate with Evangelicals’, Luis Palau, interview with Melissa Steffan, *Christianity Today* (14 March 2013), available at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march-web-only/luis-palau-pope-francis-drinks-mate-evangelicals-bergoglio.html>, accessed 10 September 2020 (paywall).



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Pope Francis at an ecumenical event celebrating the Reformation in Malmö, October 2016

because they have lost their faith in God, but because they have lost their faith in the Church. They are disillusioned.

Others who do hang in there are looking for a fresh vision of God at work beyond the walls of the churches. This group has found much in the writings and demeanour of Pope Francis to inspire them. In *Evangelii gaudium*, he critiques not only society but the Church itself, acknowledging, for example, that while certain customs may be beautiful, they no longer serve as means of communicating the gospel.⁶ This resonates deeply with contemporary approaches among thinkers and practitioners of mission. The Church Mission Society, for instance, has embraced Francis's call in *Evangelii gaudium* to explore how the Holy Spirit is at work in our rapidly changing culture and find ways of growing and expressing faith that transform everything in alignment with the gospel.⁷

Attending to what God is doing in the world through the Spirit, the healing of all creation and the newness of life that Christ brings takes the focus away from institutions. The emphasis in *Evangelii gaudium* on Jesus as the model for mission, along with reliance on the Holy Spirit and intercession, are key to building communities of faith outside the

⁶ See *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 43.

⁷ See, for example, Jonny Baker, 'Yes to Mission Spirituality', *International Review of Mission*, 104/2, (November 2014), 393–402.

traditional boundaries of the Church.⁸ The vision of going out to where people are in their cultures, rather than expecting them to come to church and join us, is a mission imperative that those involved in new initiatives in sharing the gospel realise is vital if the gospel is to thrive.

Evangelism is not a quick fix. It ‘consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, n.24). There are things to be learnt from the wisdom of the people as well as things to recognise and affirm. The search for the magic formula that will bring people back to church is always a temptation and simply does not work. Evangelicals, known for their activism, need to heed the fact that not only does God go ahead of us in mission, but God is not in a hurry. Current initiatives include Fresh Expressions, pioneer communities, and the church planting and emerging church movements, but it is not only here that common ground has been celebrated and hope for the future expressed.⁹ The secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, a group made up of Pentecostals, Baptists, and members of the Reformed and Independent traditions, visited the Pope in 2014 and subsequently said that a ‘new era in evangelical and Catholic relations’ had begun.¹⁰

What are the characteristics of Pope Francis that appeal to evangelical Protestants? I shall turn to these now so as to fill out the picture of how he is perceived by them.

Biblical and Charismatic

The Pope’s advocacy of bible reading and prayer as vital spiritual practices is prominent in what he says and writes; and his personal spirituality suggests that he practises what he preaches. Evangelicals of all kinds warm to this kind of spirituality. Whereas the papacy has traditionally been distasteful and something of a mystery to most evangelicals, schooled to disregard pomp and ceremony in religion as well as sitting lightly to liturgical worship, Francis’s attitude has come as a breath of fresh air, offering the possibility of more shared ground to be discovered. They love stories that portray his humanity—a man who enjoys a cup

⁸ See *Evangelii gaudium*, nn. 269, 279–283; and Cathy Ross, ‘The Joy of the Gospel: From a Theology of the Balcony to a Theology of the Road’, *Anvil*, 33/2 (n.d.), available at <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/joy-gospel-cathy-ross-anvil-vol-33-issue-2/>, accessed 10 September 2020.

⁹ See *Fresh Expressions*, at <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/>.

¹⁰ ‘WEA Secretary General Visits Pope Francis, Sees “New Era in Evangelical and Roman Catholic Relations”’, *World Evangelical Alliance*, at <https://worlddea.org/fr/news/wea-secretary-general-visits-pope-francis-sees-new-era-in-evangelical-and-roman-catholic-relations/>, accessed 10 September 2020.

of coffee and wearing casual clothes—but it has to go deeper if there is to be a spiritual connection.

Evangelicals of a more conservative nature stress the supremacy of the Bible in all things pertaining to salvation, while charismatics emphasize a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. Francis's spirituality has much to commend itself to both groups. Encouraging all Christians to read their Bibles is music to every evangelical's ear. For them, supreme authority rests in the Bible, not in a Church or tradition, so they may well be hoping for further changes to ensue in a Roman Catholic Church that has returned to its roots in scripture. The expectation that God will speak through God's word is not confined by any human-constructed boundaries, and so a Roman Catholic may sit down with a Protestant to read the same scripture and see the same light shine out of it. A serious concern for evangelicals is the fragile state of the traditional family, so Pope Francis's encouragement to husbands and wives, parents and children to read the Bible together at the start of the Synod on the Family in 2014 makes for common cause.

The Pope's emphasis on the Holy Spirit endears him to charismatics, for it is the key characteristic of this branch of Protestantism. The charismatic movement, from the 1960s onwards, had already drawn Roman Catholics and Protestants together in ways that were hitherto inconceivable. The common ground of experience of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts has broken down barriers, enabling the two sides to pray together and build lasting friendships. We might therefore anticipate Francis being viewed sympathetically by charismatic Christians, with an overcoming of prejudice towards the Catholic Church.

Nicky Gumbel, leader of the large charismatic Anglican church Holy Trinity Brompton in London, was quoted in *Christian Today* magazine as saying how much he loved the Catholic Church, because it was leading the way in evangelism. He added that *Evangelii gaudium* was key to his current thinking on evangelism. From the person who heads up the Alpha evangelism course, used in Catholic parishes as well as many Protestant ones, this is significant. In the same article, Gumbel highlighted friendship, personal experience of the Holy Spirit and going to people outside the Church as essential to evangelism if it is to be effective.¹¹

¹¹ See Ruth Gledhill, 'Nicky Gumbel: "The Catholic Church Is Leading the Way in Evangelisation"', *Christian Today* (12 July 2015), at <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/nicky.gumbel.the.catholic.church.is.leading.the.way.in.evangelisation/58774.htm>, accessed 10 September 2020.

The quality of friendship seems to be embodied by Pope Francis in his relational way of dealing with situations and issues, which encourages efforts on both sides of the divide to reach out and overcome differences for the sake of the gospel.¹²

Care for the Earth

Ask any young person what is the most important issue facing the world today and he or she will say that it is the desperate state of planet Earth. Protestants have no better track record on caring for the Earth than Catholics, historically speaking. But Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* offers a sustained reflection on how, together, we can make a vital contribution to change.

The document shows a Church in touch with current thinking on environmental issues. Evangelicals are reassured by the biblical basis provided for action. This biblical material helps us to ground belief in the dignity of all human beings theologically and to speak up on behalf of those most vulnerable to climate change. The same material also teaches about our responsibility towards creation. Both are gospel principles that all Christians must espouse and live out as witnesses to God's purpose for the world. Francis speaks from the start of 'our common home', a vital truth, but one that is weakened by a divided Church. 'Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.' (n.83) As with *Evangelii gaudium*, the focus on full life in Christ is one that evangelicals can share, with confidence in the hope that together we may learn how to 'live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously' (n.47).

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2020, *Saying Yes to Life* by Ruth Valerio, addresses many of the same themes as *Laudato si'*, including the emphasis on the poor and what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the giver of life.¹³ It is a reminder that not only do the two church traditions share many of the same concerns, but that there are global issues that we cannot tackle alone.

Authentic Humanity and Radical Discipleship

Over and over again it is the character of Pope Francis, the man himself, that is remarked upon by evangelicals, who see something of Christ in

¹² See *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 245. The Pope regards ecumenism as imperative for evangelization.

¹³ Ruth Valerio, *Saying Yes to Life* (London: SPCK, 2020), 155–156.

him. Words such as ‘kind’, ‘compassionate’, ‘humble’ and ‘authentic’ are frequently used of him. Young people are said to value authenticity above other qualities, and Francis would seem to have this in spades. In *Evangelii gaudium* the Pope wrote that he must practise what he preaches and be bold in seeking to reform the papacy (n. 24). He criticises clericalism and stresses the message of the gospel over the institution of the Church. He talks about all members of the Church being ‘missionary disciples’ and repeatedly stresses the inclusive nature of the Good News of Jesus (n. 120).

Pope Francis has been seen as bringing a new model of authority to his role, characterized by humility and compassion, but also by radical attitudes reminiscent of his namesake St Francis of Assisi. Everyone loves the saint who rejected the expectations of his family and culture; and his youthful zeal and unconventional style continue to draw Protestant Christians frustrated with the way the traditional Church is. St Francis also transcends party divisions within Christianity—especially, but not exclusively, among younger Christians, for whom he may be the only saint they can name with confidence. Such Christians also relate to him today, perhaps more than ever before, because of the attention drawn to the plight of the created world. Francis of Assisi was a radical who lived a counter-cultural life that challenged so many of the world’s values. He brings together a Jesus-centred faith and care for creation. This is what evangelicals are taught to seek in their spirituality. ‘Do not be confirmed to this world, but be transformed’, as Romans 12 says. These younger Christians, who discuss their views and ideas on social media,



see Pope Francis as a reformer and someone trying to take the Church in the direction they feel it ought to go. They like the fact that he tries to speak to those outside the Church as well as inside.

There are a number of new communities springing up, often ecumenical in nature, which draw inspiration from desert and monastic spirituality. One of these is the Northumbria Community, which has been around since the 1980s and continues to grow. They speak of being a 'church without walls', and are greatly encouraged by the example of Francis.¹⁴ Catherine Askew, a co-leader of the Northumbria Community, wrote,

Having a monk with a heart for the poor at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church has shown us that another way is possible. Pope Francis' commitment to the monastic life has grounded him in simplicity and kept him connected to the marginalised, even while he is holding the centre. What a gift for our times!¹⁵

When he first became Pope, Francis was seen as challenging even his own Church by resisting the pomp and monarchical authority associated with the papacy, along with seeming to shift the debates around sexuality, money, power and the urgent need to combat climate change. That this dismays some Catholics may be beyond the interests of Protestant Christians, who focus on what they see as echoing their own concerns. Thus the qualities of Francis of Assisi crystallizing in his commitment to poverty, reform of the Church and devotion to the natural world are easily transferred to the contemporary Francis and applauded by observers.

Evangelicals appreciate the stories told of Francis refusing to sleep in the papal apartments or wear his cassock at all times, or instances of him noticing those who serve him and paying attention to their needs even as they waited on his own. They may not know much about the politics of the Vatican, but they see the pomp and ceremony and do not find it in the gospels. Charismatics set little store by ceremony of any kind in church life. Their leaders will often shun liturgical robes and any kind of ritual. Francis is thus an ally in the efforts to make the gospel accessible to all. His informality and spontaneity are attractive to charismatic Protestants, with their more unstructured way of being Church. These Christians expect their leaders to speak from the heart

¹⁴ See 'Our Rule of Life', *The Northumbria Community*, at <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/>, accessed 10 September 2020.

¹⁵ In an e-mail to the author.

as led by the Holy Spirit and examples quoted above bear this out as a quality evident in Francis too. His call to discard what is no longer useful is heard gladly by Protestant Christians longing for change.¹⁶

Protestant Spirituality and the Pope

Perceptions of the Jesuits have changed a great deal since the Second Vatican Council. The opening up of guided retreats to laity has coincided with a much greater openness towards practices such as spiritual direction and retreats among Protestants. Discovering Ignatian prayer has helped many Protestants of all traditions to deepen their devotional lives, rooting them more deeply in scripture.¹⁷ Evangelicals in particular, already committed to bible reading and prayer as fundamental to being disciples of Jesus, have embraced Ignatian-style meditation on the Bible and found it life-giving. It has helped to get them out of their heads and in touch with their feelings, as well as teaching them to use their senses in prayer. The Examen is widely used in all kinds of settings—theological colleges, small groups, youth groups and discipleship training. Many Protestants of all persuasions have made their way to St Beuno's Jesuit Spirituality Centre for retreats and have returned again and again. Ignatian retreats now feature in many, if not most, Anglican retreat centres; and many Protestant spiritual directors have an Ignatian training. To such well-prepared believers, Pope Francis could only be good news.

For more traditional evangelicals, who are perhaps suspicious of Jesuit practices, the words written to preachers in *Evangelii gaudium* may come as a happy surprise. The Catholic Church has not been the go-to source of guidance for most Protestants eager to learn homiletical techniques, yet the principles enunciated there would sit comfortably in most evangelical theological colleges: pray; read the bible text for the occasion; pause to reflect and seek to understand; give it 'time, interest and undivided attention' (n.146). Above all, preachers must know the truth that they aim to preach themselves first and share the lives of those to whom they seek to communicate God's word (n.150). The lovely phrase that evangelizers must 'take on the "smell of the sheep"' (n.24) is much repeated in Protestant educational circles, both lay and ordained. Francis's insistence that lay Christians are as important

¹⁶ See *Evangelii gaudium*, n.27.

¹⁷ See, for example, Anne Netherwood, *The Voice of This Calling: An Evangelical Encounters the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola* (London: SPCK, 1990).

as the clergy, who are there to serve, and that therefore all are called to grow in their discipleship, puts spirituality firmly on the agenda of the whole Church and chimes with the evangelical emphasis too.

Marriage, Family and Sexuality

There have been differing responses to Francis's statements on issues to do with marriage, sexuality and the family. On the one hand, young people, especially, are glad that he has expressed an accepting and inclusive attitude towards the LGBT+ community, although there has been criticism of his words concerning transgender people. Francis's advocacy of the admission into church of divorcees is less of an issue for most Protestants but it points to his compassion and desire to include. There is disappointment among evangelical Churches that have revised their attitudes towards women in leadership and hope to see greater equality across the wider Church. It is clear, however, that he has a fan club among younger evangelicals that is not put off by the apparent hesitation on this issue. It seems that they can separate the personal appeal of Francis from the institution he leads.

On the other hand, there are those who cry with relief at his clarity of teaching on marriage and the family. The fact that *The Churchman*, a Reformed Protestant journal not known for its friendliness towards the Catholic Church, carried a review of *Amoris laetitia* by Andrew Atherstone is itself worthy of note, but the reviewer's generally positive piece concluded with the words: 'it would be a cause for celebration if any member of the Anglican episcopate were to publish an exhortation containing half as much classic Christian doctrine and biblical sense'.¹⁸

The Challenge to All Christians

Cynics might say that a shrinking Church in Western post-Christendom inevitably makes increasingly desperate Protestants seek to make common cause with a pope who speaks the same language. The emphasis on evangelization on both sides does, indeed, suggest that it would be foolish to work in opposition when Christians are increasingly in the minority. The lack of unity among Protestants is a scandal that diminishes the impact of the Good News we profess to proclaim. The further scandal and ensuing pain of being out of communion with Rome is a sharp

¹⁸ *The Churchman*, 131/4 (Winter 2017), 369.

reminder of how we must appear to the rest of the world. How may we expect a divided and broken world to be able to take the gospel message seriously while these divisions last?

Of course, it is not enough to like someone just for saying the things we want to hear. Many of Pope Francis's concerns come as a challenge to all Christians, Protestants included, and yet they strike a chord because we know he is right. He is right, especially, to prioritise the needs of the poor of the world. When the Pope launched Charis at Pentecost 2019, he stressed three priorities: evangelization, Christian unity and service of the poor.¹⁹ Austen Ivereigh has explained how Charis ensures that charismatic renewal faces firmly outwards.²⁰ The temptation to turn inwards when the going gets tough cannot be tolerated if Christians are to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, but each of the three priorities brings demands and will stretch the Church beyond its comfort zones. This applies no less to Protestants than Catholics.

All this is not to deny the conflicted nature of so much of church life, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Internal divisions and the clerical abuse scandal have afflicted both, for example. Catholics and Anglicans are both facing similar global issues as global institutions trying to hold together vastly different cultures and perceptions of what it means to follow Jesus. It is perhaps above all the humility of Pope Francis in the face of the greatness of the task of bearing witness to the Good News that is such an encouragement. His contemplative stance towards the world, his palpable love for Jesus and his hope that transformation is possible make him someone who is taken seriously not only by evangelical Protestants but also by many of all faiths and none in our troubled world.

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¹⁹ See Pope Francis, address to the leaders of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal International Service, 8 June 2019; and <https://www.charis.international/en/home/>, accessed 11 September 2020.

²⁰ Austin Ivereigh, 'Is Francis Our First Charismatic Pope?', *America* (14 June 2019).