

# FAITH AND POLITICS

By PAUL BOATENG

**M**Y FAITH, over the years, has been a constant though varying factor of importance in my life. I come from a radical Christian, Non-Conformist background and the Church and Christianity have always been there.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is not a question of my being 'born again'; it is not a question of my coming to faith at a later time in my life or at a time of crisis or whatever. I therefore relate to Christ as someone who feels that he has known him since he was a child. So Christ has changed for me over the years as my relationship with him has changed.

## *Growth in personal faith*

I was brought up in Ghana, in West Africa, in a country where the spirit and religion are very real and they are integrated as a matter of course into the social fabric of the community and indeed of the family. My baptism was indicative of that. I was baptized quite late at the age of five. This was because my parents were very anxious that I should be baptized in my father's village even though I was born here in Britain as my father was studying at King's College, University of London at the time. So when we went back to Africa I was baptized then. My earliest memories, therefore, of Christianity are literally of baptism! I can recall the Church, I can recall the service, I can recall bawling like mad when I was about to be delivered up to the Lord. Because, as far as I was concerned, that was going to be a very real thing. I was going to be torn away from my family and all the people I knew and loved! So that was my earliest and traumatic memory of the Church. It was very, very tangible.<sup>2</sup> Then the faith in that village was also very tangible because my grandfather would tell of a time when he was locked in what was quite literally, for many people, mortal conflict with the local fetish priest and with the pagan religion of the time. Indeed my grandfather was 'destooled' and lost his chieftainship for his pains. He talked of the trial of strength that they had had about him crossing a line marked on the ground. If he crossed that line his legs would swell—and some people did

cross the line and their legs did swell because their faith was not so strong, but his did not! So all that was around and about me. This left, and still leaves, a very strong impression.

The Church was also very much a social centre. For me, going to Sunday school was not a trial because when you went there you had a whole series of friends. It was fun and something that I enjoyed. That was a particular privilege, I think, in terms of coming to religion. But then over the years it developed. It became something that was a source of strength and a source of inspiration at varying and particularly trying times. Indeed it needed to be that source of strength because, as a family, we were divided and my mother, my sister and I had to leave Ghana without anything except a couple of suitcases. My father was put into prison. We came to a strange and new town in Hertfordshire (Hemel Hempstead) and so the Church was an element of continuity. I sang religious music and I had done the same in Ghana so it was a continuation of that life. When I went to university, again my closest friends were Christian, as it happens. There again, we were looking for a place of calm in the confusion of everything crowding in, of what can be the panic and the emptiness of that particular part of one's life, of having to adapt to new people and to a new learning situation. So again the Church was a place of continuity.

I think that at that time in my life I began to recognize that, for me, the faith was also going to be something that enabled me to underpin my growing sense of political commitment. I saw this in terms of a realization of the need to face up to the issues that dominate and convulse our society—racism, poverty, the arms race—and to seek ways of contributing personally to the search for alternatives. I began then to see the gospel in terms of the concept of justice and liberation in a way, oddly enough, that I had not seen it before. These things had been there before because, after all, we had had a very political life in Ghana as my father had been a cabinet minister. Politics was part and parcel of our life. Yet I had not integrated the two things in the way that I came to do at and after university. I began to start thinking in a much more serious way about my faith and about what it brought, uniquely, to the experience of being politically committed. What was different about being a Christian and being politically committed at the same time, as opposed to being simply politically committed? I think that the answer I groped towards and indeed am still working on is that, of the many 'isms' and the 'ologies'

that we concern ourselves with in our society (and rightly so because there is a political debate and a class conflict that truly exist), all are founded on materialism of one sort or another.

*Faith and politics*

In the 1970s, in the light of coming from a political background and also the new-town experience it was becoming increasingly clear to me that you could provide a whole range of material benefits for people; you could begin to tackle the issue of employment and unemployment; you could in fact be providing decent education but, despite the fact that the country was awash with money, there was still a great searching. There was a feeling of emptiness. People were dissatisfied. The new-town experience was not a happy one for many people. There was isolation; there was alienation. Materialism simply had not delivered the goods. Socialism, underpinned by materialism, had not delivered the goods either in terms of an alternative society that could challenge avarice or greed and that could present some new values which spoke of a participatory society or caring society. The growing reaction against this on the part of the Conservative ideology (that we see now in full bloom and which has its roots in that period and particularly in its failures) was brutally individualistic in every sense—not only economically and socially but also religiously. It was clear to me that that sort of individualism was not the answer either, because it was also very materialistic and equally did not have any room for the Spirit or the linking of the Spirit with the situation in the world around us.

So I felt that as a Christian, and as a socialist, I did have a role to play in promoting the fact that there is a place for the Spirit in the sort of society that we want to create. Indeed, it seemed to me that we would fail if we did not link our political and social analysis with a place for the Spirit of God, and recognize the yearning and the longing that people have for spiritual fulfilment. For me Christianity underpinned and undergirded politics in a way that made politics something in which I wanted to be involved. This was true in terms of grassroots activism but also, and ultimately, in representational politics initially at local and now at national level. So, therefore, my faith has been through those various stages up to the present.

*Personal integrity in politics*

I think it is important to ask yourself why you want to be involved in politics. If the answer is that you see politics as a career (and there is nothing dishonourable about that) then perhaps you are faced with greater dilemmas as a practising Christian and as a practising politician than you would be if you see politics as a vocation and therefore integrated into the rest of your life. I see politics as a vocation. Therefore I have developed my political responses along lines that do not bring me into conflict with my religious beliefs. Because the one fuels the other.

Now I also happen to believe that it is important to think in terms of one's own fulfillment as a human being. I want to be personally fulfilled and I want to grow. My experience is that you are not fulfilled and do not grow if your attitude towards politics is one that runs against what you ought to do and what you seek to do in terms of your personal relationships, and in terms of articulating the truths that you have arrived at as a result of your experience of life. If you deny relationships and if you deny the truth, you will not be fulfilled. Equally, you will not enjoy your experience of life and I want to enjoy my politics. I do not want, constantly, to be looking over my shoulder in fear of the consequences of actions that run contrary to the principles that make life worth living and that, ultimately, hold the promise of the triumph over death.

What it does mean, of course, is that I do not have and I do not feel I can afford to have an attitude towards my faith that requires me to go around making judgments about other people and telling them where they have erred. This is not to say that there are not people who should do that. That may be their calling. As I do not have the compulsion to do that, my faith does not become something that is unpleasant for my political colleagues who do not share it. As a matter of fact, the attitude of my colleagues varies. For some it is mildly interesting; for others merely eccentric. Then on the part of some there is a recognition that, as far as the Labour Movement is concerned, the link between faith and politics is a long tradition that runs from the Levellers and Diggers of the seventeenth-century British social revolution forward to Kier Hardie and the Labour Movement of the twentieth century, through the radical Non-Conformist chapel tradition. This tradition is a proud one within the Labour Party and I do not feel the need to apologise for it and on the whole it is recognized.

Some react with contempt and suspicion, but fortunately this is not the prevailing reaction. For myself, I do not ram it down people's throats. They know that it is there and that it is part of my life.

*Radical politics and legitimate anger*

Is the articulation of anger that is associated with radical politics a problem? The fact is that I *am* angry. And I feel that I have a great deal to be angry about. I believe that anger and love are not mutually exclusive. The gospels are shot through with both. The expression of anger in politics is perfectly legitimate. Which is not to say that there is no need for love in politics. And the love that is all-embracing and that does not require an answer, *agape*, is very important. What I seek to do in my personal relationships in politics is to say, 'Yes, I am angry; I strongly disagree with you', and I have no hesitation in making that clear. But I am not in the business of hate. Hate-politics is, in my view, self-defeating. I do not think that it evokes the sort of response that we need in society in order to bring about lasting and real change. I believe it sours and makes more difficult the practical business of relationships with colleagues and administering and governing. I also think that it weakens the creativeness of political debate. I therefore seek to avoid it, although not in a sloppy sentimental way by saying 'I love you all', or 'we should all be friends in politics', or 'after the debate it doesn't matter', because in fact it may well matter a great deal. To love does not necessarily mean to like. I try to have that as a guide for myself in terms of my political relationships.

I try to remember, in terms of my own political philosophy, the fact that in the twentieth century two of the greatest movements for change, in terms of colonial independence and in terms of racial justice, were led by people who saw love as a positive and practical instrument of policy. It is no use paying lip service to Gandhi or Martin Luther King without appreciating what underpins this. So anyone who tries to mock a philosophy that has room for the Spirit and denounces it as somehow politically irrelevant has a lot of answering to do in terms of what happened then and also in terms of the way we who are involved in political movements now hark back to that time, to those people and to those movements for inspiration.

*The legitimacy of violence?*

Obviously all this raises the question of the legitimacy of violence in contexts of radical political conflict and liberation. This is a very difficult area and I have to say, first of all, that I am not a pacifist. I therefore accept violence as maybe a necessary instrument in challenging evil, but I accept it with qualifications and say that we must avoid a cult of violence. By that I mean raising it up, whether as some kind of mystical or transcendental experience or as something that is somehow fine and ennobling. Violence inevitably degrades and makes everybody ugly regardless of what side they are on in a liberation struggle. If it becomes a cult and if it is unrestrained and unqualified, it will debase its product. However, I am afraid that I cannot say that violence is never a justifiable response. I believe that there are times when there is literally no alternative, but I cannot bring myself to glory in it. Nor do I find it particularly edifying as a Christian to search for scriptural justification for it, even though it can be done.

*A liberation theology for Britain?*

Recently there has been some talk about the need to create a liberation theology for Britain. This raises a number of serious issues. For a start, the Christian community as a whole in this country is not engaged in any struggle. Liberation theology comes from struggle and it comes from faith communities convulsed in the midst of social and economic change and actively seeking to make themselves part of it. When the Church in this country embarks on that road, then we will have an indigenous liberation theology. But until then we have no option, those of us who seek individually or in small groups to take sides in the great debates that are going on in this country and in the real struggle that is taking place, but to borrow and to seek inspiration from Latin America and from Africa. We can find it there and I have no hang-ups about borrowing it.

If you think about it, that is precisely how the gospel has been spread. Of course it is a reversal of what happened in the past but I am quite happy about that. I suspect that some people are not particularly happy about this and are seeking once again to re-assert the supremacy of Western theology. I am not sure that they are in any position to do that. At this time, on so many levels, we in the West are inferior qualitatively and quantitatively to the movements that are taking place elsewhere, which draw on

part of the Western tradition but take it forward. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit and we should seek to open ourselves to that.

### *A people's Church*

Obviously I hope and pray and would work for a situation where the Church in Britain does become more engaged. What we have to ask ourselves in this country is whether we have ever had, truly, a people's Church. This is a question especially for the Established Church but also for others. I do not think that we have. If you do not have a people's Church, if you have a Church that has always been very closely linked with the power of the monarchy, then of the gentry and the power of the mercantile class (where the Non-Conformist tradition cannot escape stricture either), then it is very difficult, when you are really on one side of the great divide, to find a new place for yourself. I think that this is why the Churches are under such enormous pressure at this time and why it is so difficult for them to be the institutional arena for the creation of such a people's Church.

The Church really has to divest itself of an enormous amount of historical baggage before it can hope to fulfil that role. What is interesting is that the Churches that are growing are, in my experience, much more people's Churches, particularly if you look at the Pentecostal tradition which is a very working-class one. In terms, certainly, of the black community this movement comes from people who are often untutored and unlettered. As it happens, these people are now seeking theological training in ways that the Church is beginning to respond to. It is very much, as I say, a Church of the people and they are the ones who, it seems to me, are on the march at this time.

There are also those who, as it were, make themselves a people's Church by presenting themselves as a religious version of the (popular right-wing) *Sun* newspaper. This takes the form of a sort of individualistic fundamentalism that promises material well-being as a consequence of spiritual cleanliness. That is another manifestation of the people but with aspirations and needs that are different from the others. What this underlines, of course, is that people's movements are not always radical. This presents a very real dilemma for the Churches but one which they need to listen to. The Church has to ask itself why it is that people are drawn to this. It is not simply that people are greedy. They want

something that is affirming and that gives them a sense of value and worth. And if masses of ordinary people do not get that from the established Churches, then I suspect that is because the established Churches are devoting themselves to making some other group feel affirmed. So we must not be surprised if people turn elsewhere and sometimes, indeed, along paths that we would not want them to travel.

Of course I am personally involved at the centre of one of the established Churches by being a member of the Methodist Conference! If I ask myself if I am optimistic as to whether these Churches can divest themselves of the trappings of power, I have to say that, in human terms, I am not. And yet, as a Christian, I do believe in the capacity of the Holy Spirit to work and to transform. And to that extent, as Christians, we are always privileged to have a sense of optimism, because we do believe that it is possible to bring about fundamental change not only in individuals but in institutions as well. We must, for as long as we can, work where we are. This also means, as well, working where we feel happiest and able to work. And, at this time, I feel most happy and most able to work in Methodism with all its faults and with all its weaknesses. For me it has a great deal to offer and a tradition upon which it can draw in order to transform itself—as indeed does the Roman Catholic Church. I think that the Anglican Church is in a much more difficult position because it is, historically, so much the creature of accommodations with power. That presents a very real dilemma for British Anglicanism. I really do not know how they are going to get out of it.

### *Christians and power*

You see, as Christians, we have a very ambivalent attitude towards power. We assume, somehow, that power is bad whilst at the same time taking it for granted and using it. We are very closely attached to it in a myriad of ways and yet are not really prepared to address it in the way that we once were. We are not prepared to address it in terms of what having power means, in terms of our resources. There are still, for example, Methodist churches that charge other churches for the use of their halls. That I find absolutely astounding. To ask for a contribution is one thing but to refuse people who do not give it is another. That seems a very odd way to relate to one's resources and, in an Anglican context, I have had some very difficult experiences with the Church



Commissioners. We are also not prepared to address the power that lies within our congregations and those who exercise power and influence within our congregations. We are not prepared to enter into a dialogue with them or indeed to go out and enter into dialogue with those who hold power in the land. We would rather get alongside the powerless and say to them that we are there to help them, that we are their advocates, than get alongside the powerful in order to challenge them. You see, the powerless are much more comfortable to be with in fact. To be alongside the powerless can subtly leave us still feeling powerful. The Church alongside the poor is all very well but what about the Church *of* the poor? There is a difference here. It is much easier to be alongside the powerless than to say to them, 'You *are* the Church'. This scruple about power and the belief that it is somehow tainted are not shared by those who have a different perspective on Christ in this world and of Christianity. There are those who do not hesitate to sit down at breakfast with the powerful and gather them around and to make this demand or that demand of them and to organize them in all sorts of ways. We, in the established Churches, really do have to ask ourselves some very important questions as Christians about how we relate to the powerful.

### *Christians and racism*

How does my experience of being both black and Christian in Britain make a difference to the way I see things? It is important to say, of course, that the majority of Christians in this world are black! This has to be the starting point before any discussion about blackness and Christianity. This means a certain need for re-adjustment. If you live in the West and are thus part of a Christian community that has a majority who are white, there is inevitably a degree of tension because we have not yet reached a stage where the truth that the majority of Christians are black has been widely accepted.

Christianity is still widely regarded as something which *we* (the white people) brought to *them* (the black people). This contrasts with the enormous implications of that phrase from scripture 'out of Egypt have I called my Son'. Out of Africa I called my Son! In Jesus's own life he went with Mary and Joseph to Africa, to Egypt, in order to merge into the background. They did not go to Bournemouth or Bognor! There is still a massive job of work

to be done to get that fact over and especially to get black people to recognize that fact.

I have to say that my experience in Sunday School in Ghana was of gentle Jesus meek and mild, in a field of marigolds, daisies and pansies, surrounded by deer and bunny rabbits. Those were not the animals, or the flowers or the fields that I saw around me in Africa. The sort of whey-faced, blond-haired, blue-eyed portrayal of Jesus bore much more resemblance to the British Governor-General than he did to my father! Or indeed to the historical Jesus. That does something, of course, to black people and only now, I think, are black people beginning to claim Christ for a tradition that is other than the Western European one. That can be a painful process for everybody. But it is happening, and in the process of it happening I think that we get much closer to the historical Jesus and to the universality of the message that he brings. That universality and its cultural non-specificity are extremely important. There is that marvellous scene in the gospels after the crucifixion where the veil of the temple is ripped. It has always seemed to me that at that point the Holy Spirit erupts around the world. The Spirit has escaped the temple, has transcended the Judaic tradition and is there for everybody. We must cling on to that image.

I once had a very moving experience. I was in Chicago and I visited an exhibition of art treasures from the Vatican. I went right the way through, through all the Botticellis, the Michelangelos and the Dürers and all of it was very beautiful. In the last room there was a bronze crucifix that came from the Congo and it was a fantastic piece. Jesus on the cross with Mary and two other figures by her side. What struck me immediately was that the features of Jesus and the other figures were those of Congolese people. Of African people. On the side of this piece, written by some learned scholar, was a description and it said that this was an indication of the decline of the influence of missionaries and Christianity in the Congo. Now, in fact, the very reverse was true! It might, indeed, have been a decline of the missionaries but it was certainly not the decline of Christianity. It was those people in the Congo taking it on board and making it theirs.

That experience really stays with me and we need to learn from it. We need to *do* it at every level. Not simply in terms of our images but in terms of our ways of worship. I am bound to say that, for me, this does not mean introducing a steel band after a

Byrd motet! For Byrd is as legitimate an expression of mysticism and of wonder and the Spirit as the *Missa Luba*. I do not think it is simply a question of messing around with the liturgy to draw from here and there, but it *is* about recognizing the integrity of different approaches and different expressions of our faith. It is a question of not being embarrassed by them. There is a story, and it is not an apocryphal story, of the Methodist Superintendent visiting a church where in the course of the service a couple of people shouted out 'praise the Lord!'. At the end of the service the Superintendent said, 'That was all right but we cannot have too much of this "praise the Lord". That would never do'. Somehow it appears as a threat and something that has to be contained. That is a wrong way of seeing it and we have to look at the validity and the integrity of the different ways of worship.

Finally, I just want to suggest that one of the contributions that the Afro-Caribbean tradition in Britain has to make to the Church is a recognition that there is something vitally important about the Holy Spirit and also about integrating Christ and his message with the whole life, culture and society. This tradition can teach us not to run away from the Spirit. This is not something that is limited to the Pentecostal Churches nor to the other new Churches that are emerging, but is also present in, for example, my Methodist congregation in the Walworth Road led by the Reverend Vic Watson. There we must be about ninety-percent African or Caribbean—mainly African, but we are, all of us, black and white, whatever our background, united in the Spirit. Such is the wonder of Christ if only we are open to him. Christ the liberator, born in Bethlehem, Judea, is at work in Bermondsey, London and wherever else we allow him.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This is a transcription of an interview which Paul Boateng kindly recorded at *The Way* editorial office.