

Corbyn vs. Smith: Faith and the Future of the British Labour Party

Written by Peter Walker

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PETER WALKER, SEP 21 2016

On Tuesday 6th September 2016 Christians on the Left, alongside Sikhs for Labour and the Good Faith Partnership, co-hosted a theologically fuelled political discussion hosted at the Oasis Centre at Kennington Road, London. The event was aimed at reconnecting the (potential) Labour Party leader with some of the fundamental, religiously motivated, groups and movements which have supported the founding and development of the Labour party; whether directly affiliated or connected through shared motivations. The fact that neither keynote speaker- Jeremy Corbyn and Owen Smith- claims to hold personal religious beliefs would be of particular interest- if the audience had not abruptly been reminded of the hotly debated leadership election. This article aims to, firstly, provide a brief description of the compatibility of faith and politics, despite the emotiveness surrounding the role of religion and politics using the concept of Christian Socialism as a discursive framework. Secondly, this article will look at both candidates' models for engaging with these faith-based political groups and how this reflects upon their potential future leadership. Finally, due to the overarching leadership campaign, this article will also evaluate the performance of each key-note speaker at the event and how this reflects upon their leadership campaigns.

Firstly, it is briefly worth outlining the relationship between faith and politics. It should be understood, that this is not for the purposes of demonstrating a relationship between Church and State, or vice versa; rather it is about portraying the causality between an individual's faith and a call to action. This relationship is best conveyed through examining religiously motivated social reforming groups and movements like the Christian Socialist Movement (1848-1854). This movement would stem from Protestant Unitarian theology and critical ethnographic interactions with the Victorian Working-Classes. This political development upon Unitarian theology, necessarily meant the political interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ. Through interpreting the meaning of Christ with an almost secular discourse, the group built a model of Christ which would be unrecognisable to Calvinistic and Pentecostal sects of the Christian faith, which sought to obfuscate its followers from the troubles which they suffered on the material Earth, with the notion of a reward in a future iteration of life. This socio-political theology was about the here and now. It aimed to mirror the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. The group felt that this would be best reflected through two principles: co-operation and association. Over the next century these principles would culminate in the Trade Union movement, the Co-operative movement and the Labour movement. Here we can see how an individual's interpretation of their faith compels them to be active within their community. These are principles readily accepted when applied to areas of Charity, such as Church-run foodbanks, but there is an emotive persuasiveness to perceive of a disconnect between faith and/or religion with politics.

After the event officially commenced, Corbyn was the first, the decision having been made by coin-toss, out of the two key-note speakers to take the stage. Corbyn's prepared speech centered upon the role that politically-motivated faith groups and movements have had on the history and development of the Labour Party, Trade Unionism, the Co-operative movement and, of course, the notion of Labour values. Corbyn outlined how this shared development originated in the reinterpretation of their faith by some religious groups. As one of the clearer examples, one can easily highlight the Christian Socialist Movement of 1848-1854 and how this would influence key figures of the Oxford Movement and the development of Catholic Social Teaching which would play a key role in the development of Labour values. However, Corbyn would focus his speech on the space which these various religious movements would provide for people who held -or would come to hold- Labour values; portraying a focus on the individual and

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the power of an individual's contribution to social justice and political change. Corbyn would then reflect heavily on his own political constituency, Islington North. Corbyn concentrated upon how his constituency is a very culturally and religiously diverse community, with Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, Islamic, Anglican, Hindu and Catholic religious spaces in close-connection to each other. He noted how this experience taught him that it is possible to address the necessarily challenging conversations regarding faith and religion as long as they were conducted under the principles of respect.

It is then, perhaps unsurprising that when Corbyn elaborated on to the subject of his proposed future involvement with religious groups as leader of the Labour party he would do so not in the context of a 'photo opportunity' (Faith and the Future of Labour, 2016) but rather through real engagement. This would culminate in a high relevance in the future of humanitarian politics in the age of the refugee. He noted that there were clear political and humanitarian solutions to aiding these diasporas, and that aid could never come in the form of 'surveillance and gun boats' (Corbyn, Faith and the Future of Labour, 2016). This line of thought is consistent with his intention of conducting Labour politics not just through the mainstream context of his party, but as part of a wider social movement(s). It became clear that for Corbyn, who is known for being well acclimatised to opposition-politics, politics is not confined to Parliament; change and development could be well orchestrated from the dimension of social movements. Here, perhaps unsurprisingly given the tension between Corbyn and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), Corbyn would reflect heavily on how Labour values do not stem from the PLP. Rather, Labour values were built through a multiplicity of social movements and individual social reformers; including those with religious concerns. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the continuation of Labour values and the pursuit of social justice could be furthered and maintained through similar meetings and not just by the pursuit of parliamentary power.

Smith would take the podium at 8pm, directly after Corbyn. Smith chose to begin by reflecting upon the ostensible disconnect between faith and politics. Near the beginning of his speech Smith asserted that 'politics has fundamentally failed to understand faith' (Smith, Faith and the Future of Labour, 2016). Through this statement Smith was directly reflecting upon Alistair Campbell's infamous statement 'we don't do God'. It seems evident that for Smith, the government and the Labour Party wouldn't offer a privileged space for religion or religious expression, but that they were open to the politically-motivated religious groups who saw their faith as being inherently political and offering a legitimate commentary on social justice and wider social reform. He underlined this point by noting that whilst he did not share a personal faith, he shared an understanding of the role of faith and the Labour movement. Smith explicitly mentioned the tradition of Christian Socialism which stemmed from the social activism of Robert Owen and the Chartist Movement. He noted that the key principles which were injected into the Labour Movement from faith movements were: social justice, co-operation, tolerance and respect. Whilst Smith included a multi-faith approach within his speech, he was more explicit in eliciting the significance that Methodism has had on the Labour movement, alongside principles of Socialism.

However, the future of faith under the potential future leadership of Smith was less well defined. Smith's speech evolved to be concerned with getting Labour back into 'power' and how this ambition was not an over-zealous ambition. However, Smith's speech became heavily concerned with the notion that the Labour Party could not make any real positive changes within society unless it was 'in power'. This seemed to conflict with the general aim of the event. This is because the event was, in some part, conducted in the spirit of the past and development of the Labour movement. Namely, that the Labour movement was not conceived as a homogenous movement, but was an amalgamation of numerous social-reforming groups and movements. It was at its heart a movement striving for real change and can be perceived as achieving such change. To suggest that Labour is impotent if it is not in government, is a negation of Labour values. It suggests that change does not come from the people, but from government. At this stage Smith's campaign presented itself as being somewhat conflicting; to suggest Labour values are the remedy for social ills, but to suggest they are impotent unless they are elicited within a certain environment is concerning to say the least.

It was noted by a few of the other speakers at the event that the two keynote speakers, Jeremy Corbyn and Owen Smith, were not in competition with each other at this particular event, it was fundamentally aimed at being about this proposed reconnection. This would be a particularly interesting concept as both figures do not claim to hold personal religious values. However, through Smith's introductory speech and many of the audience's questions, one was

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quickly reminded of this much debated leadership election. At this stage it has been suggested that there is a clear link between an individual's personal faith and their motivations for political engagement. It has also been outlined how each Labour leadership candidate addressed the notion of 'faith and the future of the Labour Party'. Therefore, it seems appropriate to briefly reflect on how the two candidates' performances at this event reflect on their potential role as Labour Party leader. With regards to how the candidates appeared on the evening, the audience could not help but feel sympathetic to Smith's, and indeed a majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party's, claim that Corbyn was not 'traditional' leadership material. Corbyn wore a brown blazer, white shirt, black shoes and trousers, in addition to his usual 'unkempt' beard and a distinct lack of a tie. In contrast, there was a clean-shaven Smith wearing a 'crisp' white shirt and well-polished black shoes, shrouded in a 'well-fitted' navy suit and with a red tie. But, of course this is a very superficial approach to assessing leadership material. Such an endeavour can be far better aided through an individual's words and actions. Corbyn made a point to make eye-contact with each of the other speakers as they passed him and also looked towards Smith, as Smith addressed the audience. Whereas, Smith was transfixed on his notes in front of him and seemed to choose to face away from Corbyn when he was talking. These traits of Corbyn have seemingly been noticed by Smith, when a few days later at a special 'Labour Leadership' edition of Question Time, Corbyn outlined how Smith, if elected the leader of the Labour Party, fancied Corbyn for the entirely made up leadership position of "President" of the Labour Party, or the more existentially viable position as party "Chairman".

With the striking similarity in policy propositions from the two candidates, Corbyn's commitment to a Labour social movement, Smith's adherence to the exclusive view that change is orated through government office and the question of the two's viability for a leadership position. It is clear that this will be a leadership campaign which promises the potential for a more potent Labour Party and perhaps a radically different party from its iterations in recent years. Therefore, it is apparent that the potential future leader will have to be prepared to work with different groups, movements and parties in order to orchestrate their vision for the future. Moreover, the leadership hustings referenced within this article clearly hold significance. The Labour Party must conduct itself, in opposition, in such a way that increases its political platform for the next general election. Is there a bigger platform than faith and religion? Could faith return from its political exile to play a bigger role in the political landscape of the United Kingdom? Or will Labour chose to seclude itself from its history, ignoring its key foundering values and principles?

References:

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About the author:

Peter Walker is currently a doctoral student at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), researching Christian Socialism within the United Kingdom; having received a full MPhil/PhD Scholarship in Theology and Religious Studies (2015-2018). He is also associated with the Intersectional Centre for Inclusion and Social Justice (INCISE) as a PhD Researcher. Peter also has a keen interest in the contemporary application of Marxian thought, as well as an intellectual curiosity in the field of Queer Theory and Critical Studies.