

INTRODUCTION

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We begin with a horror story.

It is a fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference, September 2015, Monday morning. The British Humanist Association, the UK's premier association of atheists and agnostics, is hosting its 'no-prayer annual breakfast'. This is a lot like the prayer breakfasts that are held annually in Westminster, Washington and many other political capitals, only somewhat smaller and without any prayer.

Breakfast has long gone by the time shadow business secretary Angela Eagle, soon to be a contender for leadership of the Labour Party (and therefore, in theory, the country), launches into an attack on Tim Farron MP. Mr Farron is the new leader of the Liberal Democrats, a party hunted to the point of extinction at the 2015 general election. As the leader of the nation's only other centre-left party, one might have expected Ms Eagle to attack Mr Farron for (some of) his policies or his political principles. But instead, her attack took a different line.

'At a time when we have a huge revival of fundamentalist religious belief,' she told them, 'we have a newly elected leader of the Liberal Democrats who is an evangelical Christian who believes in the literal truth of the Bible. He does. He just doesn't want to talk about it a lot because he knows how much it will embarrass his own party.'

Ms Eagle's vision was alarming, if a little sketchy on the details (if, after all, there has been a huge 'revival of fundamentalist religious belief' in the

UK, one can't help wonder where they all are on a Sunday morning). Still, she blew the dog whistle with vigour: 'revival', 'fundamentalist', 'evangelical', 'literal'; the choir to whom she was preaching must have shuddered. The prospect of a religious – a *seriously* religious – politician getting anywhere near the levers of power is, Eagle implied, petrifying. Her speech was a reminder, according to the *Guardian* diarist who attended and wrote about the event, that fundamentalism takes many forms.¹



With no disrespect to the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the UK (who, for the record, does in fact speak openly about his Christian faith²), Mr Farron is rather unlikely to get anywhere near the levers of power. The Liberal Democrats' brief union with the Conservative Party in the 2010–15 coalition government ended in an appallingly messy divorce in which the senior partner got the house and most of the savings, and the junior one the contents of the garden shed and a sleeping bag. Even had they not been left with only eight (now nine) MPs, it is unlikely that any Liberal Democrat party leader will rush into political marriage again. In that regard, it was simply the energy with which Ms Eagle reviled Mr Farron's faith that was unusual. One wonders what she would have said of a parliamentarian who stood a genuine chance of office.

But if her vigour was unusual, the denunciation itself was not. British voters are familiar, some wearily so, with the idea that Christianity and politics do not mix. We all know what happens when they do: crusades, inquisitions, invasions, persecution. We free moderns should never forget that religious adversaries are always on the prowl, seeking someone to devour. The price of secular freedom is eternal vigilance, usually of religious people.

Nevertheless, it was the great secular hope that walls of separation, whether constitutionally or culturally erected, and the general decay of Christian belief in the West, would render any theo-political threat dormant, and such eagle-eyed vigilance redundant. Denunciations like that at the 'no-prayer breakfast' would become unnecessary because there would be too few Christians, either in power or in voting booths, for the theo-political menace to scare the secular horses.

The last forty years have turned out somewhat different. The rest of the world did not do what most Westerners expected it to, and secularise in the manner of its formal colonial powers. The emergence of politically confident Islam in the Middle East and south Asia; the continued strength of Catholicism in Central and South America, and its growth in Africa; the remarkable explosion of Pentecostalism in Central and South America and in sub-Saharan Africa; the extraordinary story of Christianity in South Korea, and its survival and then upsurge in China: none of this had been predicted. Different paths were taken and Western politicians found themselves operating in a world that is, as the sociologist Peter Berger has remarked, ‘as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever’.³

Worse, Western politics did not secularise, or more precisely did not secularise as fully and comprehensively as many were expecting. The upsurge in Christian engagement in US politics startled many from the late 1970s; Pope John Paul II played a seminal role in the end of communism in Europe, and even in the somewhat less religious countries of western Europe and Australia, churches remained a part of the political scene, often playing significant walk-on roles themselves. Moreover, as the stories in this volume indicate, Christian political leaders have hardly become less prominent over recent decades, and may, in fact, have become more so. Worse still, those Presidents and Prime Ministers were often open and unapologetic about their faith, and its political significance. It was the stuff of Angela Eagle’s nightmares.



This book examines the faith of those leaders, twenty-four of them to be precise. While it can be read straight through it can just as profitably be dipped into and cherry-picked for figures who especially appeal to readers.

All but one of its subjects were happy to call themselves Christian, the exception being Václav Havel, whose writings on theism and ethics are so striking that they demand attention and inclusion, and all held highest office (all but one executive office). Nevertheless, for all their similarity in framing and focus, the chapters in *The Mighty and the Almighty* are subtly different. When a subject has a long and twisting life story, such as Nelson Mandela,

more space is given to charting that. When a subject or their country is liable to be less familiar to a reader – Lee Myung-bak in South Korea, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, or Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, for example – the chapter offers more background and explanatory detail. A few chapters – well, the one on Havel – offer more space for discussion of the subject’s writing and intellectual ruminations. For some, most commonly American Presidents, the cup of evidence runneth over; for others, often British Prime Ministers, we find ourselves gathering up the crumbs from under the political table. Because no two political leaders are alike – and, as we shall see, being a Christian political leader does little to alter such diversity – no two chapters on them are alike.

Of our subjects, the majority held or hold office in Western or ‘developed’ countries (the exceptions – Mandela, Sirleaf, Lugo and Goodluck Jonathan – provide interesting points of comparison), although not all those countries are ‘Western’ (e.g. South Korea) or indeed fully functioning democracies (e.g. Russia). Most of the leaders are (or were) openly and publicly Christian (although some were rather camera shy) but by no means all liked to claim a direct connection between their faith and politics. Some were more culturally Christian; some more comfortable with vicarious faith; others were explicit and confessional; a few were converts; several once contemplated a career in the Church; one, remarkably, had been a bishop. Many others – Tarja Halonen of Finland, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, F. W. de Klerk of South Africa, Lech Wałęsa of Poland, Boris Trajkovski of Macedonia, John Bruton and Bertie Ahern of Ireland, Yulia Tymoshenko of Ukraine, José María Aznar of Spain, Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder of Germany, Stephen Harper, Jean Chrétien and Justin Trudeau of Canada, even Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe – might have been included but for reasons of space (and, in some instances, available source material).

As mention of the last of these names suggests, *The Mighty and the Almighty* is no work of apology or PR. Robert Mugabe might have been vigorously attacked by the Catholic hierarchy in Zimbabwe (at least recently) but he was educated as a Catholic, married in a Catholic church and calls himself a Catholic. He did not, alas, make the cut but Vladimir Putin, no less open about his devout faith (to Russian Orthodoxy) did. Neither is renowned as

a paragon of democratic virtue. The purpose of *The Mighty and the Almighty* is not to discuss nice Christian politicians, or those politicians we would like to be Christian, or those Christian politicians with whom we agree (who, after all, is the ‘we’ here?). Rather it is intended to look at leading politicians – meaning those who have sat in the highest office – who have claimed some Christian faith, and to explore how they have squared the two; how, in effect, the Mighty (or at least those who professed a belief in him) have dealt with the Almighty when in office.

As any good pollster will tell you, twenty-four is a pretty low sample size, even when dealing with a ‘universe’ as small as this one. We must be careful about drawing firm conclusions about ‘how politicians do God’ from such a group. Nonetheless, some patterns and tentative conclusions do emerge and are discussed at the end of the book. Before that, however, *The Mighty and the Almighty* seeks to offer a series of theo-political biographies of men and women who have had more of an opportunity than most to shape the world in which we live. What role their Christian faith played in this shaping is explored in each chapter. Whether it is something about which we should be delighted, pleased, indifferent, sceptical or, like Angela Eagle, afraid is a question to which we shall turn.

NOTES

1. Simon Hattenstone, ‘The cult of Jeremy Corbyn, the great silverback mouse’, *The Guardian*, 29 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/29/jeremy-corbyn-labour-conference-great-silverback-mouse> (accessed 19 January 2017).
2. The author heard one such address at a public meeting in the Attlee Suite in Portcullis House in November 2016, to mark one year after the Commission on Religion and Belief report, in which Mr Farron was positively evangelical about his faith.
3. Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: The Resurgence of Religion in World Politics* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 2.