

“Voting With our Feet”

The Challenge of the Politics of the Far Right and the Churches

The Churches' Response

Introduction

In this paper I have been asked to consider what might the Churches' response be to far right extremism following the June 2009 MEP elections, and whether present responses are adequate and helpful. Approaching this question I will attempt to do three things:

- 1 provide a brief general summary of immediate responses following the election of the British National Party (BNP) to the European Parliament;
- 2 take a closer look at the relationship between the Churches and fascism or extreme right wing groups;
- 3 offer some pointers to what an effective approach might entail.

1. Immediate responses to the election of British fascist as MEPs

1.1 There has been a considerable outcry following the electoral gains by the BNP in the recent elections to the European Parliament (EP). It is generally agreed that these gains were made on the back of public lethargy in the UK: only 35% of the electorate bothered to vote, but this is generally considered a new and disturbing development.

1.2 The outrage that followed assumed many forms:

- Press articles;
- letters to newspapers from members of the public;
- at least one remarkable resolution by a U.K. Church, the Methodist. (Importantly the Church of England's General Synod of February 09 also took action);
- Peter Hain MP, Secretary of state for Wales, said: 'It is a shameful stain on Britain that we now have racists and fascists representing our country. It is vital that everyone now isolates and confronts the BNP and works with Unite Against Fascism to defeat them';
- Note the Guardian (9th.June) under the heading, "*The genteel face of British neo-fascism*".

1.3 This electoral development, however, was merely one of a number of events in the rise of the extreme right in Britain, though a significant one nonetheless; extreme right wing developments in local and national politics throughout Europe continue to give serious cause for concern.

1.4 Whilst it is unnecessary to expend energy describing the BNP, it is important to take a broader look at what essentially is the politics of hate. BNP elections to the EP represent a shocking chapter in the history of right wing extremism and hate across the industrialized world, not least Europe. Their intentions are clear:

Mission Statement

'The British National Party exists to secure a future for the indigenous peoples of these islands in the North Atlantic which have been our homeland for millennia. Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, Norse and closely related kindred peoples ... we daily work with our people in their homes and communities addressing the fundamental issues of civil liberties and reverse discrimination. Increasingly our people are facing denial of service provision, failure to secure business contracts as well as poor job prospects as both reverse discrimination excludes our people from the school room, workplace and boardroom.

The fact that it is not a democratic party heightens the horror many felt at their election. In response to the BBC's invitation for the BNP to appear on Question Time, Weyman Bennett, Joint Secretary of Unite Against Fascism said: 'The BNP is not a normal, democratic party. It is a Nazi party whose political agenda is to destroy democracy and wipe out minorities ethnic people in Britain. By granting Griffin a primetime platform the BBC is in practice helping to legitimise the BNP and its politics of race hatred.'

1.5 The mandate and voice of the church are vital in naming, challenging, and combating discrimination and hate, particularly the pernicious version of social exclusion represented by extreme right wing groups in whatever form it appears. In one of his most important speeches, Martin Luther King Junior acknowledged this truth:

MLK: Discrimination is a hellhound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them...He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

Ghandi: 'Hate ever kills, love never dies'.

The responses made are a necessary reaction, but they are far from what is required of the churches and society generally. The lessons of history must be learnt, particularly when personal security has become a major concern vast numbers of ordinary people, quite apart from the concerns of national governments or intergovernmental institutions.

1.6 People do vote with their feet, and thus often raise the question of the relationship between the churches and fascism.

2. Christians and Fascism

2.1 Fascism in this paper includes not only right wing extremism, such as the BNP, but also the thoughts and actions of decent well-mannered people. There are two dangers with meetings like this one, therefore: the first is that we speak only to the converted, the usual suspects; the second is that we do not speak at all about fascism, less likely actively challenge it.

2.2 The first does not matter so much, provided that the results of our deliberations are some clearly thought out strategy. The second is a real danger: we need to be clear what we are talking about and intend to do about it.

2.3 Fascism is not racism; it is not racial violence, not any authoritarian or repressive regime, not any dictatorship, nor increased police power. Emphatically fascism is not a conspiracy or the result of a conspiracy. All of these may be elements within the process of what some call 'creeping fascism'.¹ Fascism is more than all of these: it is an inevitable development of capitalist imperialist society, a socio-psychological reaction of largely middle class people to a society which does not fully embrace the finer elements of socialist agenda.

2.4 Fascism is the logical result of certain processes of development, a phenomenon of industrial society in severe socio-economic crisis, confronted with the threat of socialism, which contain a very frightened and threatened middle class.

2.5 Fascism is also the human capacity to hate for such reasons that justifies the capacity of some to believe their superiority, to such a degree that it dehumanises or regards other human beings as morally, socially and intellectually inferior.

2.6 Fascism can appear very plausible and highly moral. Early fascism appealed primarily to the middle class and the inhabitants of suburbia. It has a great attraction to those decent people who are prepared to exchange justice and freedom for a measure or assurance of decency and security. It has a particular appeal to those who feel betrayed by mainstream politics, and for whom fascism fills the vacuum in a hurry.

2.7 The churches may be particularly vulnerable to the appeal of fascism on two counts: firstly, when religion degenerates into 'quietism' (MLK) and sentimentality. Lutheran pietism at the time of Hitler's rise was otherworldly, which drew a sharp distinction between the Kingdom of God (otherworldly, spiritual) and the affairs of this world. Secondly, it is inevitable also when religion is closely associated with a dying social order so that the church cares more about its privileges than its theology.

2.8 At Charlottenburg in 1941 German, for example, evangelicals sent a notorious telegram to Hitler, assuring him of their 'unshakeable loyalty' and hailing him as the saviour of Christian civilisation.² Hitler himself said that he had come to complete the work of Luther, and many good decent people believed him. 'I do insist on the certainty that sooner or later—once we hold power—Christianity will be overcome and the German church, without a Pope and without the Bible, and Luther, if he could be with us, would give us his blessing.'³

Martin Luther King Junior a little later said: 'Had Catholics and Protestants come out into the streets and helped the Jews to clean the sidewalks Hitler might never have increased in his power, and a great catastrophe might have been averted'.

2.9 The church has had some important interventions to make, nevertheless, but the record of the church vis-a-vis fascism can be ambivalent. There is the long history of compromises and support for repressive regimes – Transatlantic enslavement, Hitler

¹ *Christians and Fascism*, an address given at a Public Meeting against Fascism, Toynbee Hall, East London, published as a Jubilee Group paper: April 1977.

² See James M Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 493.

³ N. H. Baynes, ed., *'Hitler's Speeches'*, (Oxford, 1942), p. 369.

National Socialism, Mussolini, Salazar, Franco, Jim Crow, Apartheid, to mention a few, but on the other hand there is the record of witnesses and martyrs: many of them clergy and bishops, in resistance to such regimes. Perhaps this reveals two types of Christianity which is indicative of the really fundamental divide within the Christian world.

2.10 There are four areas of activity that can lead to fascism:

- religious movements which confuse Christianity with western society and its values; many Christians are willing to exchange justice for decency, and who, because although highly moral, they lack theological depth, can be easily conned by apparently moralistic movements.
- movements which attempt to identify and attack minorities and lay blame on them in a blanket way. It is not just blacks and Asians but a whole scapegoating process which can be extended to squatters, the Irish, the mentally ill, youth, the unemployed, the poor – anybody, in fact, who forms a threat.
- most dangerously, there is the activity of those strong financially powerful vested interests which organise to defend the established structures and to resist threats to their security and power. These may include anti-trades union groups, attacks on the welfare state, and para-military defense organisations.
- finally, there are the grass-roots racist and 'populist', organisations which exploit fears and resentments, as well as entirely genuine wrongs at the local level, and organise them into race hate groups.

The point is that these are not the sum total of the problem. The problem of the respectable suburban appeal of fascism is far greater. **It is not just the electorate's inability to distinguish between right and wrong.**

3. Response

3.1 Below is a note of some tasks which are urgent in response to creeping fascism:

- the need for rigorous and continuous analysis of what is happening, for disciplined monitoring of the activities of racist and fascist groups. No response can be effective which is not based on accurate data.
- a recognition that one cannot fight fascism without building socialist systems. If there is not a movement towards inclusiveness in society, then fascism of some kind is inevitable. The creation of a socialist society is the only really effective way to defeat fascism.⁴
- there needs to be local action in the deprived and neglected areas which are the breeding ground for fascist groups. Anti-fascists appear in these districts to be do-gooders and political activists from elsewhere who come for a season but are

⁴ Though not comprehensive in rates of success over 20 years from 1985, note the actions which followed *Faith in the City*, the churches' response to the social unrest of Britain's 1980s Inner Cities.

uninvolved in the real day by day lives of the people. Sometimes the fascist groups seem to them at least to understand their plight. There needs to be a deep involvement in such issues as health care, tenants' rights, the care of the old and lonely, and so on. We need to be people who care more about the social evils which provide the raw material for racism and fascism than the racists and fascists do. Fascism cannot be defeated from a distance by people who are remote from the problems it manifests.

3.2 The message to the churches must surely be that at a time of a growing sense of insecurity, economic strangulation caused by greed and mismanagement, anti-Semitism, global migration, the church must rediscover its essentially Jewish roots and the Jewish basis of its Gospel. Enshrined in the Law of Moses is the theme of the "Year of Jubilee", the expression of a hope for justice and freedom for this earth, its land and its people. It is useful therefore to recall the words of Father Stewart Headlam, once a curate in Bethnal Green, on the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria:

The Queen's Jubilee is good: but the People's Jubilee is better ...For the Jubilee of the Hebrews ... was the Jubilee of a whole People... That is the ideal of a true Year of Jubilee..."

3.3 What churches are doing?

- The Methodist Conference adopted Notice of Motion 203 (amended by Notice of Motion 218) and resolved ... to identify what processes are necessary to ensure that members of political parties which promote racism are not able to become full members of the Church, or speak on its behalf; and to bring proposals to the Conference in 2010. (The Methodist Church)
- The Baptist Union stated: 'It's deeply disappointing that we now have a racist party representing Britain in Europe for the next five years and it is vital that our remaining UK representatives dedicate themselves to promote the common good'. (The Baptist Union of Great Britain)
- 'We must never become comfortable with the BNP using their position to promote racist policies. We will continue to counter their message of hatred and fear'. (The United Reformed Church)
- The WCC itself held a 40th.anniversary conference in Doorn in The Netherlands in June: Among the eight points in the Conference message there are calls for the WCC '*to renew and refocus its priorities so as to initiate a new churches' movement to address racism...*'. This includes the initiating of a '*Decade for Overcoming Racism and Creating Just and Inclusive Communities*'.

3.3.2 Many tightly knit urban villages and suburban enclaves, not to mention some rural districts, are districts with low rates of people movement, strong patterns of kinship, and fierce levels of xenophobia and racism. It is not surprising that it was in these areas that Oswald Mosley found much of his support for the fascist movement in the 1930s onwards; some of these are still targets for far right extremism. Community can turn to fascism very quickly if it does not connect with other values such as diversity and minority rights.

3.3.3 While June saw elections in Europe for 736 MEPs in twenty-seven countries, and all eyes were fixed on the extreme right and anti-immigration parties, the real threat posed by their gains, processes in which immigrants and vulnerable minorities have been scapegoated and stigmatised for society's ills have been strengthened. Anti-immigrant sentiment and intolerance are being incorporated into the agendas of mainstream political parties.

Europe

3.3.4 While there were notable successes for the extreme right in Europe, it is noteworthy that the picture was not uniform.

- The share of the vote for the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the Front National in France, for instance, declined substantially.
- the Islamophobic Freedom Party in the Netherlands under the leadership of Geert Wilders, made dramatic gains, coming in second in the European parliament elections with 15 per cent of the vote.
- Equally alarming was the breakthrough for the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) and for the True Finns;
- the doubling of the Danish People's Party's share of the vote;
- and lesser, though significant, gains for the Austrian Freedom Party, the Slovak National Party, Greater Romania Party, the Popular Orthodox Rally in Greece and the British National Party in the UK.

3.3.5 Whatever the extreme right's gains and losses, whichever country it takes root in, it spreads a toxic poison through a rhetoric which blames the global recession on familiar enemies – blacks, Muslims, Roma, Jews etc., - thereby encouraging the growth of fascism.

3.3.6 There has been a neo-Nazi resurgence in the Netherlands, Spain, Austria and Germany. The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) now has 176 seats on regional and city councils, and is even gaining ground in Western Germany. And where the neo-Nazis flourish, racial violence follows. There have been four racist murders - in Germany, Malta and Hungary - and a 45-year-old Roma woman was shot dead and her daughter seriously injured in Kisléta, Eastern Hungary, in an incident which the police are treating as racially motivated. Romanian Roma who migrated to Belfast have been forced out of Northern Ireland, and there has been a growth in arson attacks and other violence against refugee reception centres in Finland and Sweden.

3.3.7 What the growth of intolerance and neo-Nazi violence should do is clarify the nature of the real enemy we face. Persistent racism and discrimination among the decent people, and disunity between groups representing the Roma, Jews, Muslims, blacks, refugees can no longer be tolerated. The decent and respectful silence is no longer an option; piecemeal approaches are no longer effective options.⁵

⁵ The actions of Stephen Kramer, Secretary General of the German Jewish Council, were exemplary. Amidst a deafening official silence against the horrendous murder of Marwa al-Sherbini in a German courtroom, he was the first non-Muslim to describe the attack as motivated by hatred, something that the German government had, initially, resolutely failed to do.

3.4 What Churches in Germany do

3.4.1 Several times the regional Protestant Churches and their federation, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), have publicly spoken against right wing extremism and xenophobia - rarely do they speak about racism even though that would be appropriate. The EKD and regional churches take part in state activities and public actions against right wing extremism and xenophobia. They have regarded the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II as an opportunity to remind church members of their personal and political responsibility to act against right wing extremism.

3.4.2 In this year of many elections in Germany, the EKD Church parliament, the Synod, published a declaration where they - recalling the important role of the Protestant Churches in the former GDR in the fight for democracy and human rights which led to the peaceful revolution of 1989 - call everyone to take part in the elections and vote for political parties that stand for democracy and human rights and not for parties on the extreme right, by saying that racism and anti-Semitism are not compatible with Christian belief.

3.4.3 The Church in Berlin-Brandenburg refers to the declaration of the EKD-Synod and published posters and a manual under the title 'Watch, Perceive and Address' where they explain what right wing extremism is, the language, the music, the clothing, the religion, where it is happening in the regional church, how parishes can deal with it, what you do with right-wing-extremists in public meetings; projects and activities are presented, addresses and literature given.

3.4.4 In May, 2008 the anniversary of the end of World War II, the Church leaders called for preaching peace and against right wing extremism and xenophobia. This was followed by a whole year of activities against right wing violence including materials for services and a lot of information. The Church also set up a Working group on right wing extremism.

Examples of BNP reprimand

A 60-YEAR-OLD man declared himself to be "BNP and proud" after subjecting neighbours to racist abuse. John Chappell told a Cambridge-born man with Caribbean origins to "go back where he came from", a court heard. The attack occurred in Newmarket after the man was asked if he had been delivering British National Party (BNP) leaflets.

Neil Lamington, a neo-Nazi who had planned a racist terror campaign in Britain, has been given an indeterminate prison sentence for public protection at the Old Bailey in London and told he must serve at least six years.

3.5 What churches could prioritise

3.5.1 Developing a genuinely inclusive theology of the 'Kingdom of God', and living it out in reality is paramount: this transcends barriers of ethnicity, colour, creed, class and gender, social status, and should lead Christians to accept those who are 'different', embracing others as 'God's creation'.

3.5.2 The roots of racism and hatred lie deep within the soil of human pride and a pervasive will to be different and superior.

3.5.3 The main step to the eradication of racism and fascist hatred, therefore, is *repentance*, not just personal but also collective. This is much more than confession or 'death-bed repentance'; it is the practical every-day life commitment to radical change. It is to recognize the core of the Christian gospel as the breaking down of the 'walls of partition'.

3.5.4 Renewal springs from an attempt to get under the skin of those who are different, to feel emphatically what they feel, to live what they experience, and in the process recover one's true humanity.

3.5.5 Renewal has other effects for church members: Socio-politically, we are confronted with a two-faced hypocrisy that proclaims democracy but excludes minorities and dismally fails to welcome 'strangers in our midst'. This in itself carries the potential for 'uncontrolled rage' and violence on one hand, and totalitarianism and erosion of freedom on the other. In the Kingdom beyond colour, foreshadowed in Jesus' parable of the round table (Luke 13:29-30), in Paul's sermon on the Areopag about the common origins of all humankind (Acts 17:26), and in the Book of Revelation, we are guided to search for the *common ground* and bear witness to Jesus Christ as the Great Emancipator.

3.5.6 It means to celebrate diversity, act compassionately in conflicts, and find the creative synthesis by which we link our dignity to the interdependence of all. This is urgent, as it involves *redeeming lost years*, stepping out of religious and social conclaves, moving beyond existing hierarchical and social structures, and demonstrating love to those with different backgrounds and worldviews.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The Churches are compelled to act because its theology offers an opportunity for understanding and grasping something about the *essential* nature and interdependence of all regardless, and because this is foundational to true justice.

4.2 It is the essence of our humanity which embodies without condition our *essential* distinctive differences which require understanding and acceptance (Colossians 1:15) in the context of our unity in God. But *existential* prejudices such as scientific, economic, social and political disciplines have been, and continue to be, used falsely, to promote the notion of separate unequal *essential* identities.

4.3 British fascist and far right politics is on the way to being mainstreamed at least for a significant proportion of the population. The churches must act now, together, and with courage using planned approaches, outcome-oriented actions, and in consort with secular and religious bodies, addressing the social and political conditions which deprive and exclude decent people from the democratic process, and thus restore goodwill.

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