The Bible and British Values

British values have become a major issue of public policy over recent years. The so-called 'Trojan Horse' scandal of 2014 in particular prompted the Department for Education to produce a guidance document on *Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools* [Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development]. This guidance pointed to the need actively to promote fundamental British values in schools.

The UK is unusual among Western countries in lacking a written constitution which serves as a summary of the fundamental values underpinning the state. Instead the UK constitution and the inculcation of values has been historically rooted in institutions; the monarchy, parliament, the military, and (at least historically), the established Church.

In recent times, these institutions have faced various crises, including declining public support, funding crises and diminishing memberships. The lack of a constitution, plus the difficulties facing institutions, means that defining what we mean by "British values" can seem like an artificial enterprise, even to the extent of being an exercise in claiming that the emperor does have clothes after all.

The values that we pick to illustrate Britishness inevitably reflect to some extent our own politics, ideologies, and personal value structures. In a sense this is the critical point. Defining values is not something which can be done in a vacuum; it must be reflective of something. Even the most secular values have an intellectual and moral background, usually either in utilitarianism or materialist philosophies. There is no such thing as a neutral approach to values, they necessarily operate according to (often unspoken) moral assumptions.

This is where the Christian contribution becomes critical. The UK has been (and continues to a significant extent to be) culturally shaped by Christianity. As such, conducting a debate on British values which doesn't take account of that intellectual backdrop is like building a house on sand. The debate would be greatly strengthened by being honest about where our values come from and how they have been shaped by the UK's Christian heritage.

This briefing looks specifically at the particular values as defined by the coalition government's Prevent strategy in 2011,[1] and refined in the Department for Education's 2014 guidance document *Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools.*[2] This requires schools to address four key British values; democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance It is worth noting that several of these go beyond what many people would define as a value, into practical, functional and judicial outworkings of other values. Democracy, for example, ought strictly to be seen as a political system that embodies the values of equality and liberty.

Nevertheless, these are the values that have been defined by the government and this briefing looks at each of those values and how they have developed from within a Christian and biblical intellectual space. It argues that for those values to be most effectively inculcated into education and public policy there needs to be a greater appreciation for where they have come from and how they have developed.

Democracy

It would be ridiculous to claim that the Church has always been a champion of democracy. The infamous "Syllabus of Errors" propagated by Pope Pius IX in 1864, though not specifically concerning

1 Details are available at Prevent Strategy 2011 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011

2 Published 27 November 2014 and available online https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-fundamental-british-values-through-smsc

itself with democracy, explicitly criticised the European revolutions and political emancipations of the age. Many Christian churches have been on long journeys to reach their current support for democratic government.

It would equally be true to say that notions of democracy would seem to owe rather more to Athens than to Jerusalem. However, any attempt to draw a direct historical trajectory between ancient Athenian democracy and the modern variety is doomed to fail. The UK's particular model of democracy can only be understood as having emerged through a Christian lens.

The transition from feudal monarchy to modern democratic system was not driven by a rediscovery of classical democracy, but by developing Christian notions of the individual. In the Greek model, democracy was limited to free men. In the Christian-driven vision it became understood that all adult citizens have a right to some say in their government. The move to recognise all citizenry is based at least in part on a Christian idea that all human beings are equally imbued with dignity and status, purely by virtue of their humanity.

This equality is recognised in creation, with the idea that humans are created in the image of God. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1.27). To this shared status in creation the New Testament adds the idea that all humans equally share in the possibility of redemption and salvation, no matter their race, gender or social status. In Galatians 3.28 Paul famously tells his readers that "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

Jesus' ministry takes him through every class and category of social undesirables, including women (to whom he appeared first after his resurrection c.f. Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20), the poor, tax collectors (Matthew 9.9-13, Mark 2.13-17), lepers (Luke 17.11-19, Matthew 8.1-4), the ritually unclean (e.g. the haemorrhaging woman in Mark 5.25-34 and others), and Samaritans (John 4.4-26). As a message of spiritual equality it could not have been a clearer journey.

Spiritual equality has not always been equated with temporal equality, certainly when it comes to access to power. However, in the British case the mediation of these ideas alongside a particular Protestant focus on individual salvation created the intellectual basis on which British democracy came to be based.

In terms of enshrining this as a British value the lesson must be that democracy is not valued simply for its own sake, but because it is the form of government that best embodies a commitment to equality and justice. The foundation of this value is spiritual and moral, rather than pragmatic and political.

Rule of Law

The corollary to the above note on democracy is that the Bible puts a high premium on obedience to earthly authority. This can seem almost daunting – as if we are bound to obey and accept any political authority. For example, Paul in Romans 13.1 tells us that "there is no authority except that which God has established". He goes onto remark that "he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what the Lord has instituted". Peter and Titus also call for a high level of civic obedience (see 1 Peter 2.13; and Titus 3.1). Jesus' answer to the high priest's spies who attempt to catch him out with a question on taxation is to "give back to ['render unto' in the King James version's famous translation] Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" – a command to play by the rules of the state.

However, this is not an uncritical approach to power. On the contrary, the command to obey temporal authorities is tempered by a command to obey God and to judge whether temporal laws are in conflict with God's (see Acts 4.19-20 and 5.29 in which Peter and the apostles defy the order to stop preaching about Jesus, as an example).

Obedience to the rule of law should, accordingly, be put into a broader perspective. It is not obedience for its own sake, but as part of the need to contribute towards a just and healthy society. The rule of law could be seen as part of the exhortation to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jeremiah 29.7). For

a British value this goes beyond mere obedience to power (or of acquiescence to non-interference so long as people do not infringe on the liberty of others), to something more positive about making a contribution towards British society and to serving others.

Individual Liberty

The concept of individual liberty demands, first and foremost, that there is such a thing as an individual. The focus on the individual is a particularly Christian concern. This is explored at length by the historian Larry Siedentop in his book *Inventing the Individual.*[3] Siedentop argues that Christianity created a moral revolution within an ancient world in which the basic unit was the family, of whom the *paterfamilias* was priest, judge and king, within a broader social unit in which slavery was pervasive and power absolute. Into this space Christianity presented a model in which (in Siedentop's words) "Christ reveals a God who is potentially present in every believer".

It should be noted that this creation of the individual does not entail a simple individualism. Rather, the Christian conception of the individual is one which demands a commitment to relationships. The Christian conception of God is Trinitarian, with three persons who can only exist in relationship to one another. In the same way humans, made in the image of God, are innately and necessarily relational. The idea that God was present by his Spirit in the life of every Christian and that every human was made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26-27) was fundamental to the idea of each person as an individual subject. Added to this was the conviction that this individuality was rational. So the seventh century Christian thinker Boethius defined a person as "an individual substance of a rational nature".

Alongside this notion of the individual was the developing idea of liberty. Liberty in terms of political emancipation is a theme of the Old Testament, most notably, in Exodus (but also many others including Isaiah 61), with the line that came to define a key theme of the black liberation movement, "Let my people go" (Exodus 7.16).

Notable in that Exodus quotation, however, is the oft-ignored follow up clause. "Let my people go, *so that* they may worship me in the wilderness". This raises the critical issue for an analysis of individual liberty as a value. People are rational individuals, who are granted, within a British context, various freedoms (speech, assembly, religion etc.), but what is often ignored is the purpose of such freedoms. Individual liberty is not prized for its own sake, but because it allows individuals to contribute better to the cause of justice and to do the will of God.

This has many consequences for today's policy landscape. When the right to freedom of speech is discussed in the context of universities, censorship and the press, or extremist rhetoric, one of the defences has been to claim that free speech is an absolute, one that must uncritically be supported. The "right to offend" is held up as a key value by secularist groups, among others. This is unsatisfactory. Why should you have the right to needlessly offend? The lesson of the Christian contribution to individual liberty is that these rights and freedoms are not afforded so that you can do whatever you want, but so that you might further the cause of justice and the Kingdom of God. Needless offence, in this light, is a misuse of freedom of speech, not its zenith.

Mutual respect and tolerance

As with democracy, there will be no shortage of critics who will point to the religion of the Inquisition, the crusades, current conflicts over LGBT+ rights and the status of women, and deny that Christianity could have anything to teach on respect and tolerance.

In fact, Christianity has a lot to teach on this topic. Much of this is related to points already made above, with Christianity claiming that the human dignity is owed to each individual in a way in which far exceeded any other philosophical model that had preceded it. The call to see the person of Christ in the marginalized (Matthew 25) has been foundational in the development of human

3 Siedentop, L , *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, London: Allen Lane (2014).

rights and the Western conception of respect and tolerance.

For example, Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar who became a key early thinker in human rights development, was among the first to demand of European colonialists that they recognise the humanity of native peoples in the New World:

"All the races of the world are men, and of all men and of each individual there is but one definition, and this is that they are rational. All have understanding and will and free choice, as all are made in the image and likeness of God … Thus the entire human race is one."[4]

This idea of seeing humans as made in the image of God, and therefore, sharing in a common humanity that has a special dignity, is crucial to understanding why it is that tolerance and respect are important. They are about recognition of humanity as something important in the common good and building society.

The Bible draws attention towards not only tolerance of neighbour, but the more radical charge that we must love our neighbours (Mark 12.31). Indeed this is perhaps where this value might come to be challenged. It could sensibly be asked as to whether this value really goes far enough in what it demands of us as British citizens. Drawing the line at tolerating others (perhaps by simply not interfering in their lives), is an idea with a biblical basis (we could look at the parable of the wheat and tares growing together in Matthew 13), but is ultimately short of the radical approach called for by Jesus. Tolerance might amount to little more than a bland liberalism that fails to engage with others so long as they remain within the law. Love, on the other hand, while by no means implying that we need to agree about everything, does demand that we engage with others, and actively seek their welfare as well as our own.

Conclusions

Talking about values always carries the danger of seeming glib, or else of being a cover for a different issue (whether that is confronting extremism, making a political case for multiculturalism, or any of the other politicised ways policy makers have used debates on values). This has a sapping effect. If the intention of teaching these values as part of SMSC development in schools is to inculcate a stronger sense of citizenship, then the best means to do that is not simply to teach them for their own sake, but to explain why they have become the values that matter to us as a nation. In that story Christianity is critical, not as a means of excluding other cultures, but in explaining why the values have developed to where they are today and how they might be secured for the future.

4 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologetic History*, 3 Obras Escogidas 165-66, excerpted in WITNESS, supra note 38, at 174-75.

Working in over 200 countries, **Bible Society** is a charity and on a global mission to offer the Bible to every man, woman and child. This is because we believe that when people engage with the Bible, lives can be changed, for good.

Theos is a Christian think tank which believes you can't understand the modern world without understanding religion. We seek to inform the debate about the place of religion in society, challenging ill-informed thinking through our research, events and media comment.

Christians in Parliament is an All-Party Parliamentary Group that seeks to support all those who work in the Houses of Parliament.

Bible Society
Stonehill Green, Westlea
Swindon SN5 7DG
biblesociety.org.uk
Registered chairty 232759