

Stephen Timms (ST) asked does faith and politics mix? He explained that some faith and politics lead to trouble and that people give examples of global situations, but the truth is that people are drawing the wrong conclusions from these situations. The reality is that it is a good starting point because faith has exactly the kind of values that are needed to make politics work, for example compassion and truth: these are the values that make politics work. **ST** put forward that if you look at the UK today there is a view that faith is on its way out, but if you look around that is not the reality. He said it is surprising that in a period where many can't afford food for themselves and their families, the churches have been the network to help this with: food banks and emergency food supplies and that many are church and mosque based. **ST** described the Jubilee 2000 campaign as a striking example where there was a need in our society and faith has had the capacity to help – the campaign was about the UK cancelling debts of the world's poorest countries and many supporters were from faith communities. The campaigns led to the enduring cross party consensus of paying 0.7% GDP, a policy endorsed by David Cameron and delivered by Theresa May. The policy has endured the political turmoil of last fifteen years because the target came out of faith communities and there is a cross party consensus. **ST** went on to say that campaigns, food banks and work that helps homelessness takes a commitment and energy that he would like to see being expressed in politics, if so then politics would be in better shape. **ST** finished by surmising that faith being expressed in politics is one of the best hopes that we have of politics being better in the future.

Steve Double (**SD**) began by saying he has been an MP since 2015 and he grew up in a Christian family, his father was a well-known evangelist and the family had an active belief in faith. After getting married and having children he was a pastor in church for 12 years, which he said has huge parallels to his role as an MP, although the congregation slightly different! **SD** went on to say that his faith is his foundation, shaping his beliefs, values and views of the world. **SD** believes that the values to serve God and serve mankind should be basis of every believer of every faith, and is no different for an MP than for example, a teacher or factory worker. **SD** admitted it is challenging due to living a more public life, but that his attitude is the same as when he worked in Barclays bank. He stated that what counts is the attitude people have to others and although different people disagree on many things that they have respect for each other. **SD** finished by stating that if there is one area where people can shine a light on, it is how people treat each other across the political divide and it can be demonstrated how faith can deal with this.

ST explained the faith covenant, saying it began in 2011 by inviting FBOs from around the UK to tell of the barriers they faced and it became clear that a lot of them had difficult relationships with local councils - this applied to all faiths. Also, councils were rather nervous about dealing with FBOs – that if they commission them then they worry that the money will be used to convert people or that a biased service will be provided. He said that the evidence is that this does not happen but it is not inconceivable and this explains their reluctance. **ST** described that the Covenant sets out six principles for councils and FBOs to sign up to, for example training opportunities that are offered to voluntary groups are also be offered to FBOs – encouraging people to sign up to the Covenant will allow better relationships between the two. He pointed out that stopping communities having access to fantastic resources that could really help people would cause serious problems.

Daniel Singleton (**DS**) asked the question: 'Is Britain a Christian Country?'

SD responded that he struggles with the concept of any country being Christian as such, adding that he is not sure that anyone can say that the Church of England permeates what we do, but that he does want to live in a country where there is freedom of faith, religion and speech. **SD** said that is his personal choice – he would like to think that the UK is place of freedom and liberty and believes that politicians create the legal framework to allows this. **SD** added that Britain is more multi-cultural than ever before and this is something to be proud of, but on the other hand, sadly, there are some stigmatised faiths that are treated unfairly.

ST agreed, stating that there is strong Christian heritage in the country but that he struggles to say that Britain is a Christian country. **ST** said that his East Ham constituency consists of 35% Muslims and similar amount of Christians. He notices that there are elements of Christian heritage that are strongly supported by Muslims and that people of different faiths usually have more in common with each other than people of faith and those with no faith. **ST** added that all faith communities are strongly committed to the values of Christian heritage.

DS asked the question: ‘Is the Establishment good or bad?’

SD replied that he feels it is a two edged thing, that in various times in the past decade he has held both views – that it is good because we have that basis in our national constitutions but also that sometimes it wasn’t that way things were meant to be – in countries where church is not established their faith drives them stronger.

ST stated that the case for dis-establishing the Church of England would be a huge undertaking and that there are more serious issues to address in present times.

DS asked the question: How does your faith affect your political views – Conservative and Labour?

SD replied that he always finds it interesting when people have very strong Christian faith that they end up with very different political views, right across the political spectrum and he considers this to be really healthy. He stated that he personally thinks that it is the key values and beliefs of personal respect and freedom and the good Conservative values of work hard and being rewarded for that – but that he doesn’t think that he is a Conservative because of his Christian values.

DS commented that when he talks to democrat friends in New Jersey and they cannot share this what has been said with their Christian friends...

SD replied that most of his Christian friends tend to be on the left of politics and that they ask him how he can be Christian and a Conservative and he added that America is much more polarised than the UK and thankfully it is not like that here.

ST answered the question by stating that as a student, he was influenced by David Sheppard who wrote Bias to the Poor, which summed up the teaching of Christ in relation to politics and says it should be biased to the poor. **ST** then asked which party was biased the party - and then supplied the answer as being the Labour party.

SD commented that it is more a pragmatic thing about how poverty is addressed rather than the issue itself.

ST responded that all parties are dependent on their funding –and that Labour is funded by Trade Unions, not rich people. He stated that he is a trade union member but not sponsored.

DS then opened the floor up to questions.

Student 1 forewarned that his question may be a bit controversial, stating that Labour claims that the UK is not a Christian country and is welcoming to all, but that Labour MPs had resigned over anti-Semitism...

ST responded that it is a problem in his party but in others too. He stated that he agrees with Tom Watson about importance of dealing with it and getting on top of it and that it is not easy but it must be done and it will be done.

DS asked the question: Does this reflect on the UK? Are we intolerant to minority faiths?

ST answered no and added that five years ago Jewish people would say that the UK was the safest country to be Jewish in, but that this had changed very fast, due to the anonymity of social media and the unpleasant things that happen online. **ST** added that there is an Online Harms white paper is coming out soon to address these issues.

Student 2 asked if, essentially, given that we are a country directly associated with Church of England with an innately Christian agenda, whether that signalled that we are not as open as we would like to think?

ST responded saying that the last few years had highlighted a strain of intolerance and that he does not believe that Brexit has a Christian agenda – and that Brexit and Trump are much in the same category!

DS repeated the question for **SD**.

SD stated that it is very difficult, that he is very comfortable with his faith and view of the world with regards to leaving the EU, that it is an opportunity or the UK to recover some of its diluted heritage – adding that is his political view. He said that it is an issue that it depends on where you look, that there are many examples of tolerance in our country, but that we sadly cannot deny that we have also seen a rise of intolerance, that in some segments of society, the current political environment has given people the space to express these thoughts, and social media has helped this environment. He added that some of the attitudes expressed around Brexit have exploited that – he thinks that it's a small segment but that the environment, due to social media, allows people to express those feelings.

Student 3 asked the panel whether the challenges that they encounter with faith and politics, like very religious US politicians tell white lies when speaking to their constituents– does this taint faith and had they experienced this?

SD answered that for him he would ask himself; number one – ‘what my is my identity? Am I secure in it?’ and number two - ‘who am I trying to please?’. **SD** went on to say that he has to look at himself and feel happy in his faith and before God – and that he does sometimes fail, but in world of politics he likes to do the right thing rather than the popular thing – which is a huge challenge. He stated that on the issue of assisted dying, he fundamentally cannot support it as he is a Christian, but in a referendum most people would support it. He

feels that he is not here to go along with the majority, but needs to exercise his judgment and that he is open about how his faith guides him and that he was elected by his constituents on that basis. He concluded by saying that there are some issues where his faith guides him in his voting decisions but that as long as his is open and honest it is relatively straightforward.

ST agreed that lying is out - white or otherwise, but that sometimes he will present something in a different way to different groups of people – that he isn't lying but sometimes there are grey areas where you may exclude some facts when talking to some people although the framing and presentation needs to be done carefully so that it is not dishonest.

ST thanked attendees and the panel and then left at this point due to attending other commitments. **GW** took his place on the panel.

SD said that there are people of faith and Christians who come to different conclusions – not a different motive but that they look at things from different perspectives and that ongoing dialogue is really important to understand why others see things from their perspective.

DS asked: Topical question about sex education – who should provide it?

SD answered that is very clear that the primary responsibility for this is with parents and that he is comfortable for the schools to have a role, but that the state must not try to take over the role of parents. He questioned whether parents would have the right to choose to withdraw their children from the lessons? **SD** went on to say that the guidance being proposed allows for that except in exceptional circumstances and that for example he has two sons that had sex education lessons in school but that he made sure he and his wife spoke to them about it before the teacher did. He added that it is about parents having the freedom and opportunity to make the decision for themselves.

Student: raised the point that parents should teach their children these things but that some don't – for example about contraception and **STDs** – and that schools could help with this.

SD agreed that they could, but that his problem is that he sees a downward spiral in that the state does more and more and parents then back off and that maybe the government could commit to helping parents on how to educate their children, but that the key thing is that if a parent wants the right to provide the education then that must be protected.

Student 4 suggested that the 'downward spiral' mentioned could also be a good thing...

SD responded that his experience is that if people grow up in that system then they will think that the state will teach their children that too and that is the downward spiral. He added that this is the biggest fundamental divide between the core of both political parties – what is the role of the state?

Student 5 asked: Is there a limit to accountability?

SD answered that he is very clear with himself that he is accountable to the voters in his constituency; that he is answerable to them and that comes with transparency and openness.

GW mentioned to the students that the THEOS website has many good lectures online.

Student 6 asked: Has there been a point when politics has compromised your faith and you've considered leaving politics?

SD commented that maybe one day down the line that gender alignment, for example could conflict with his faith but that he didn't think there had been anything yet that had put him in that position.

Student 7 asked: Did your faith led you into politics?

SD answered that he didn't think so, so far and that he is quite content at where he should be for the foreseeable future, adding that he thrives on challenge and things being tough, that his faith has been a journey of one that has ebbed and flowed for many years – but that he has never thought of abandoning it.

DS asked would you say you were Christian Conservative or Conservative Christian?

SD responded that he is a Christian Cornish Conservative!

GW stated that the Conservative Christian Fellowship works with Christians in parliament and intraparty too, for example the Labour Christian Union – the group engages with all Christians in parliament for example staff, security, MPs, it is all about encouraging people to be engaged.

SD then went back to the question about did his faith leading him into politics. He reflected that his faith leads him generally and that the he got into politics accidentally – it was not his ambition. He added that looking back I look he would have to say that faith was part of his journey in that respect.

Student 8 asked: Following up to the question on transparency with regards to the Brexit process, no one knows what going on – is current system failing and is everything happening behind closed doors?

SD answered by saying that there are two aspects to the question, firstly that he is a back bencher and does not have massive influence, but that he is accountable for how he operates though he cannot be responsible for how Theresa May acts. **SD** remarked that he hoped that it is true that he is open and transparent with the residents in his constituency and that he gives straight answers but that in a negotiation you don't want to show all your cards, so defended the Government – as the British media has highlighted every twist and turn (unlike Euro negotiators) and therefore so weakened the our (UK) hand somewhat.

DD asked: What advice do you have to students who are interested in working in politics?

SD responded that politics is all about people, so be a people person – it helps! He advised that in reality is it's all about who you know so get to know politicians – if your local MP is decent they should meet you if you ask. He added that students should try to get to know politicians from across the spectrum.

GW stated that he did a politics degree and then lobbied for Christian charity. He feels that now all parties interchangeable and politics is sometimes terrifying but also more exciting and more politicians have a lot of responsibility in times such as this. He added that we live in interesting times and that the politicians that have been elected in the last few years will be making decisions using opinions from ten years ago. He finished to say that that could be some of the students in ten or twenty years time!