

Left and right again

You may remember a series of *TCFNews* articles exploring whether there might be a Christian Evangelical Left as opposed to the Christian Right and the Christian Left. Some might say “*who cares*”, but recent events in both the US and Australia indicates that political parties are well aware of how religious conviction can influence voting intentions. The election of a Hillsong member to Greenway in western Sydney, the visit of the Treasurer to Hillsong and recent positioning of the Labor Party by Kevin Rudd make it clear that politicians are listening to the religious voices in the community.

In the September/October 2006 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Walter Mead provides a thoughtful article on *Religion and US Foreign Policy*, that distinguishes between fundamentalists, evangelicals, liberals and Catholics and looks at the beliefs and resulting behaviours. Unlike other media commentators, who stereotype most protestant Christians as the religious Right, Mead develops some clear distinctions that are helpful and goes on to show how each of these groups have or are having influence on US foreign policy. This summary will not do the article justice, but might wet your appetite.

The article acknowledges that *religion has always been a major force in US politics, policy, identity and culture* explaining why many American believe they are a chosen people. He sheds light on how the particular religious beliefs that are dominant at different times in the history of the US have influenced policy. Importantly he acknowledges that people do not fit easily into these labels and that many people have a mix and match of some of the beliefs and practices.

Fundamentalists, liberal Christians and evangelicals were profoundly affected by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early 20th Century in which traditional views of the Bible’s authorship were at question. The Liberals emerged with a view to accept and incorporate new scholarship into theology while the remainder wanted to stick to the “fundamentals’ such as the literal truth of the Bible. Some fundamentalists want to be separate from society and culture (fundamentalists) while others wanted to engage the rest of the world (evangelicals). Fundamentalists are pessimistic about the world and its future while Liberals are optimistic and Evangelicals somewhere in between.

Mead describes Fundamentalist as following their beliefs to their logical conclusions and that *Fundamentalist institutions are places of intense scholarship, not hotbeds of snake-handling revivalists Holy Rollers*. However, fundamentalists tend to be pessimistic about the prospects for social reform and downright hostile to ideas of world order based on secular morality and on global institutions like the UN.

Liberal Christians are more interested in ethical teaching than doctrine. They are skeptical about basic Christian doctrine concerning the nature of Jesus and the Trinity and reluctant to accept some Biblical accounts. Jesus was not supernatural but the sublime moral teacher. Liberals often claim to be the true protestants because they continue to question and challenge the established church and its teachings. Liberal protestants dominated the worldview of the US during World War II and the Cold War.

Mead sees evangelicals as the middle path sharing common roots with the fundamentalists, but with their views of the world heavily influenced by optimism. Evangelicals attach great importance to doctrine and not just ethical teachings. They

have a more positive outlook and believe that salvation is open to all and that God gives the grace to be saved. Evangelicals reinforce the message that Christians have responsibility for the world that God has placed them in. Evangelicals can live with the science-religion debates around evolution and court decision on abortion and other sexual matters. *The pragmatism of US culture combines with the some-what anti-intellectual cast of evangelical religion to create a very broad public tolerance for what, to some, might seem an intolerable level of cognitive dissonance.*

Recent decades have witnessed a change in the balance of religious power in the US. The traditional churches have been declining and the evangelical churches including the Pentecostal churches have been increasing. Membership of the parliament by self-confessed evangelicals has increased from 10 to 25 percent and evangelicals have strongly supported President Bush.

The growing influence of evangelicals has affected US foreign policy in several ways.

1. altering priorities and methods and increasing the overall support for both foreign aid and the defense of human rights.
2. deepening support for the Jewish state.

Evangelicals have a long history of support for human rights. *Thanks to evangelical pressure, efforts to suppress human trafficking and sexual enslavement of women and children have become a high priority in US policy.* Evangelicals are suspicious of state-to-state aid and support grass roots faith-based organizations.

Unlike many Christians, evangelicals believe that the Jewish people have a continuing role in God's plan. The Jews will return to the Holy Land before Christ will triumph believing that at this time many Jews will turn to Christ which reduces current tensions between Jews and evangelicals. The continuing identity of the Jews is seen as part of God's plan. Hence support for Israel is high amongst evangelicals and current events are always viewed in this broader perspective.

Mead concludes that the evangelical moment has not yet run its course which is disquieting for secularists and liberals, but the US has too much religious diversity to let any one group dominate for ever. The ability of evangelicals to work with people of other Christian commitment and of other faiths will prolong their reign. He sees it as positive that evangelicals have also provided a much needed focus on climate change, on poverty and humanitarian issues such as Darfur where there is a willingness to work with Muslims

As evangelical leaders acquire first-hand experience in foreign policy a trusted group of experts may emerge *who are able to persuade large numbers of Americans to support the complex and counterintuitive policies that are sometimes necessary in this wicked and frustrating - or, dare one say it, fallen - world.*

While the Australian media continues to be unable to distinguish between the various religious groups that contribute to the Christian right and labels all evangelicals as right, there remains a need for an evangelical left to make clear the differences from fundamentalism and to reassure the community that not all protestant Christians or evangelicals are part of the American religious right.

John Gore