

Defenders of Faith (rather than Defenders of THE Faith) – multi-faith-confessions between political tool and religious inclusion

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Great Britain's society is the most secularised in Europe. But secular does not mean ir-religious. Rather religion has become private matter, as religious needs are not expected to be satisfied in the established Christian churches like the Anglican Church. The pluralist society of Great Britain depends on the integration of people with diverse religious and ethical backgrounds if it is not to continue in its cultural and economic separation that will sooner or later endanger its political stability. Communities of faith are a stabilising force in a hierarchically organised society.

This paper focusses on the tactical use of religious issues from various beliefs by leading political figures for political reasons. These are duly called "defenders of faith" by the media.¹ We are not talking about the persons themselves, however, but about their figures constructed and commented on by mass media coverage!

The two examples chosen here suffice to show the difference in attitudes and intentions that can be seen as causes for political instrumentalising of religion.

Tony Blair for instance, regularly referred to various issues from diverse faiths, encompassing all kinds of confessions, to convince audiences of the inherent unity of their various beliefs with his politics. Prince Charles, on the other hand, comments and works on religious matters in British society and combines this with his charitable work for young people. He claims that religious issues are present in almost all social fields and therefore are crucial for dialogue, integration and productivity. In his speeches he does not mix issues from the different sets of beliefs. When he directly compares concepts, he always refers to their individual sources and background.

The two examples show an opposition of constructions that could be differentiated into pluralistically-oriented and multi-culturally-oriented. The first shows the parallels of different creeds that are considered equal and given the same framework for taking actively part in society, the latter combines and mixes aspects of diverse beliefs while keeping an emphasis on the traditional English or British culture. The important difference is the society that is

¹ In reference to the origins of the title "Defender of the Faith" that was granted to Henry VIII by Pope Leo X for a book defending the seven sacraments against Luther's theses in 1521.

duly described: the one is an integrative pluralistic society, the other is a chrysalising individualist society that demands assimilation by newcomers.

There has always been a plurality of opinions within the confessions and beyond individual beliefs. There never has been only one Christian confession. Need for differentiation is nothing new. Comparatively new is the width of differences in religions and beliefs actively pursued within the British and other societies.

The problem is not the co-existence of various beliefs but the lack of knowledge about the motives and backgrounds within different religions and the un-reflected mixing-up of issues from different religions (syncretism or more easily understood: D-I-Y-creeds²) that is given with the majority of believers these days. But religious issues are always political issues as they describe and define cultural practices, traditions and their ideological background. It is also important not to forget that political and religious motives for action usually are intertwined with their societies, too. This becomes fairly obvious in all kinds of religious fundamentalisms and their opposition to secular society.

This interchangeability and the indifference to detail, to individual ethical and cultural background of individual faiths do not allow for serious dialogue between members of the cultures concerned.

The way political elites deal with the plurality of creeds to construct a social coherence can be seen when looking at the two examples quite clearly.

Tony Blair is not pluralistic in his approach towards religions but pretended to be when being Prime Minister. Prince Charles is taking a pluralistic approach while keeping a conservative position above party political concepts (conservative in the true meaning of the word: to conserve). Prince Charles in his focus on the dialogue of religions is complementing the Archbishop of Canterbury, who tried to remind the British public of the consequences the plurality of faiths within a secular society should have: If there is no knowledge about and reflection on one's own position, there can be no differentiation and no understanding of the "other". The superficiality of the media-outcry and public debate on Sharia-courts in Great Britain following a lecture³ by the Archbishop of Canterbury proves the point.

² Expression coined by Richard Stinshoff.

³ Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury: "Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective." Foundation lecture at the Royal Courts of Justice, 07.02.2008 <<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>>

"In his lecture, the Archbishop sought carefully to explore the limits of a unitary and secular legal system in the presence of an increasingly plural (including religiously plural) society and to see how such a unitary system might be able to accommodate religious claims." ⁴

How somebody treats different faiths depends on the individual position of this person and his/her position within society. Minorities have a very sharp understanding of being put under pressure or being patronised. When we look at public figures and their references to religion and faith-issues their individual position has to be considered.

The two examples chosen for this paper both belong to the social elites of Britain. The one was born into these, the other ambitiously moved up the social ladder to the position of Prime Minister, i.e. he became (in the words of Lord Hailsham⁵) "elected dictator" and used his powers to minimise the role of the Cabinet even more than his predecessors.⁶ Blair was for the duration of his office a member of the High Church branch of the Anglican Church⁷, often called Anglo-Catholicism, even though his personal faith also included New Age-specialities. After leaving office Tony Blair converted to the Catholic Church. It has to be kept in mind that the time of conversion could have been influenced by Blair's activities for peace in Northern Ireland, which would have been negatively influenced by an earlier conversion. Prince Charles is a member of the Anglican Church, as it is expected of a heir to the British Throne.

Tony Blair (Prime Minister 1997—2007)

Tony Blair's speeches often resemble stylistically, in their register, figures of speech and pronunciation sermons of the paternalising or even patronising type. This together with the way he tried to reach people from all backgrounds by referring to canonized narratives from various religious and cultural backgrounds in speeches and discussions brought about that he quickly became satirized as the Vicar of St. Albion⁸, who uses made-up commandments to demand personal loyalty and cultural assimilation to British culture and society. Tony Blair was repeatedly described as "defender of faith" because of his inclusion of all kinds of

⁴ <<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1581>>

⁵ Lord Hailsham: *The Dilemma of Democracy – Diagnosis and Prescription*, London: 1978, 9.

⁶ Roland Sturm: "Staatsaufbau und politische Institutionen" in: Hans Kastendiek, Roland Sturm (Hrsg.): *Länderbericht Großbritannien*. Bonn: 2006, 149 f.

⁷ It seems to be customary for a Prime Minister to belong to the Anglican Church even though there is no expressed obligation to do so. E.g. even Benjamin Disraeli began to visit Anglican services when in office.

⁸ Primarily by Private Eye magazine <<http://www.private-eye.co.uk/>>

religious ethics into his vision of a society which is implicitly a vaguely Christian society. He also made numerous references to his personal faith. E.g. he stated in an ITV1 interview in 2006 that he prayed to find a decision on going to war in Iraq.⁹ At the beginning of the Iraq-war, when his advisers told him not to close his broadcast-address to the nation with "God bless you", he "told his advisers that they were a most un-Godly lot".¹⁰

After he stepped down as Prime Minister, he was appointed official United Nations Envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East¹¹ and started private business activities for the investment bank JPMorgan, and the Zurich insurance group. His conversion to Catholicism was seen politically as departure from traditional English values and religiously as turn towards a more conservative stance focussing on hierarchies and elaborate rituals. In 2008, he founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation which is not dedicated to any particular faith, its expressed aim being to "show how faith is a powerful force for good in the modern world"¹² without specifying how this was to be accomplished. When pressed on these issues in interviews, he offered no answers.

Prior to his conversion, he and his wife were also in the media because of their affinity to New Age-beliefs that seemed to go along with his Anglo-Catholicism and her membership of the Catholic Church.¹³ As it may be remembered, they had been very affirmative on the energies of Stone Circles, pseudo-ancient Mexican re-birthing rituals, militant Feng Shui, etc. Blair did not repeat the "wilder" of his mystic ideas after conversion to Catholicism, but his definition of faith has not become clearer. Now his concept of faith and religion is absolutely centred on Catholic positions and does not pay credit to concepts of redemption [Erlösung] as in Buddhism or Hinduism.

In the case of Tony Blair's references to faith, it is not possible to isolate clear and specific references to sets of beliefs and the origin and context of ethical issues. His use of unspecific renderings of faith to convince people of his positions, the more personal use of faith-related matters is important to note: That the leader of a state trusts more in prayer than in the advice

⁹ BBC News: "Blair 'prayed to God' over Iraq" 03.03.2006.

¹⁰ Tom Baldwin: "Tony Blair's Faith Foundation to sell religion as force for good" Times Online, 30.05.2008.

¹¹ Being one of the supporters of the war on Iraq, he is not the best of choices for negotiating peace in the Middle East, anyway.

¹² The Tony Blair Faith Foundation: "Mission statement" 30.05. 2008.

<<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/about-us/mission-statement.html>> (20.10.2008)

¹³E.g. in Nick Cohen: "Ev'rybody must get stones" The Observer, 8.12.2002 et al.

of his Cabinet or the expressed opinion of the majority of the population is very strange indeed. And his description of prayer does not indicate that it is another word for meditating the pros and cons of the issues at stake:

"I think if you have faith about these things, you realise that judgement is made by other people ... and if you believe in God, it's made by God as well." ¹⁴

One has to look in detail at his dualistic imagery, his description of faith and prayer and how these feel and help to find solutions to be able to classify the underlying concept: "religious belief is quintessentially about truth" – but who defines what is true? He describes faith as

"giving the use of reason a purpose and society a soul, and human beings a sense of the divine." ¹⁵

His position mixes metaphors and religious concepts. The "society's soul" e.g. remains a colourful image, but lacks clear definition or content.

And, even more interesting, considering the following relation of importances is coming from a former Prime Minister, who is putting the meaning of constitutions on the same level as speeches or pieces of art:

"This is the life purpose that cannot be found in constitutions, speeches, stirring art or rhetoric. It is a purpose uniquely centred around kneeling before God."

"Kneeling before God" is as Catholic as it can get, especially as it is described as central issue of his faith. [As Wittgenstein pointed out: all that kneeling in cold churches is bad for the bones...]

"God is selfless love, merciful and an infinite dispenser of Grace" ¹⁶ – But e.g. Hindu and Buddhist concepts differ from this – they are about the redemption of and from the self at the end of all those life-circles. ¹⁷

"And if faith takes its proper place in our lives, then we can live with a purpose beyond ourselves alone, supporting humanity on its way to fulfilment." ¹⁸

¹⁴ Tony Blair quoted after BBC News: "Blair 'prayed to God' over Iraq" 03.03.2006.

¹⁵ Tony Blair: "Faith and Globalisation" The Cardinal's Lectures 2008, Westminster Cathedral, 03.04.2008.

¹⁶ Tony Blair: "Faith and Globalisation".

¹⁷ Western New Age belief has changed the idea of rebirth into a hope for those, who fear to miss out on chances in their lives.

¹⁸ Tony Blair: "Faith and Globalisation".

But faith as motivation to work for the good of others ignores the idea of solidarity within political ideas etc. that are explicitly non-religious. Again and again, Blair's statements turn on finding a meaning in life, in its explanations usually on the brink of esoteric mysticism:

"In a sense, it was a rediscovery of religion as something living, that was about the world around me rather than some sort of special one-to-one relationship with a remote Being on high. Suddenly I began to see its social relevance. I began to make sense of the world"¹⁹

He is concerned with unspecified individual "inner" consequences of being of faith. Tony Blair is a mystic in his understanding of faith and personal relations to God – his faith is emotional, not reflective. In this position and in its mixing of elements and ideas from diverse confessions without differentiating the sources, it is not explainable to others or helping the inter-religious dialogue.

In 2008, Blair expressed repeatedly that he did not live his beliefs openly as Prime Minister because they would have been ridiculed by the press and public.²⁰ He oversimplifies and ignores that people are sceptical of illogical or "incomprehensible"²¹ faith in Great Britain (and Europe) but not of faith in general. And: during his time as PM, he referred quite openly to his personal beliefs – even that he prayed for help with decision-making.²²

In relation to his Faith Foundation, Tony Blair argues that the terrorists of September 11 represent one of two modes of Islam and of the encounter between members and societies of different faiths.²³ From this thesis he continues to argue that Europe in its secularism is out of step with the rest of the world and has to change. According to Blair, Europe needs more fundamentalist faith to be able to understand the rest of the world and to find common denominators with the less secular parts of the world. He pays credit to the example of the religious zeal of parts of the US-citizenry, and (more or less) jettisons the humanistic and enlightened traditions of (Northern) Europe – and its way to treat dogmatism etc. with text criticism, cultural reflexiveness, etc.²⁴ His desire to define what is the best way to believe is

¹⁹ Tony Blair quoted after Roy McCloughry: "Practicing for Power: Tony Blair" Third Way Magazine. the modern world through Christian eyes, 14.09.1993.

²⁰ E.g.: "Tony Blair didn't do God in Downing Street. Now he's making up for lost time." The Times, 08.04.2008; or: Michael Elliott: "Tony Blair's Leap of Faith" Time Magazine, 28.05.2008.

²¹ Comp. quote in Michael Elliott: "Tony Blair's Leap of Faith" Time Magazine, 28.05.2008.

²² E.g.: BBC News: "Blair 'prayed to God' over Iraq" 03.03.2006.

²³ Comp. section on religion as extremism in Tony Blair: "Faith and Globalisation".

²⁴ Michael Elliott: "Tony Blair's Leap of Faith" Time Magazine: 28.05.2008.

supported by the Catholic dogma that there is no salvation outside the Church.²⁵ With one stroke, he does away with humanism and enlightenment, centres on one dominating faith and waves diversity goodbye.

Prince Charles, Prince of Wales

Prince Charles²⁶ became Prince of Wales, has established his Prince's Trust network of charities and combines it with his work on religious issues, always trying to bridge communicative gaps between different religious communities. Reason for focussing on religious issues is his expressed personal interest in all matters religious and his highly debated wish to become "Defender of Faith" in the case of his accession to the Throne rather than "Defender of The Faith":

"faith itself which is so often under threat in our day where the whole concept of there being anything beyond the existence, beyond life itself is considered almost old-fashioned" ²⁷

He criticises the growing secularisation of society and the accompanying loss of respect towards nature that endangers the future of humans and nature. He also sees this as a lack of perspective on the position of mankind within Creation and makes these issues central to his public work.

"The idea that the different parts of the natural world are connected through an intricate system of checks and balances which we disturb at our peril is all too easily dismissed." ²⁸

Prince Charles has been reported in the press for many years as leaning to different religions as if in search of the one, most convincing to him. Before he was said to be close to Buddhism more recently, he had been seen as very close to Islam for many years, some even considered him close to conversion at the time. And that might have been the reason why, when his marriage to Princess Diana broke down, it was almost only the muslim-community in Britain that took the side of Prince Charles but not the Princess'.²⁹ His interests in individual religions never are commented on by his staff, he is officially associated to the Anglican Church but

²⁵ From the letters of Cyprian of Carthage: "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus", the current catholic interpretation is to be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 846-848, 851.

²⁶ His full title is: His Royal Highness Prince Charles Philip Arthur George, Prince of Wales, KG, KT, GCB, OM, AK, QSO, PC, ADC, Earl of Chester, Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Carrick, Baron of Renfrew, Lord of the Isles and Prince and Great Steward of Scotland. (Mountbatten-Windsor is not part of his name)

²⁷ Prince Charles in: "Charles: The Private Man, The Public Role" 1994.

²⁸ Prince Charles: "A Reflection on the 2000 Reith Lectures" BBC Radio 4, 16.05.2000.

²⁹ Tariq Modood in a debate on the subject on 21.11.2008 at Carl-von-Ossietzky-Universität Oldenburg, Germany.

stands in close dialogue with various faith-communities. He intensely supports the inter-faith-dialogue, e.g. by his Respect campaign:

"to encourage individuals and communities to give time to those of another faith, to share and learn together and enjoy the company of people of other cultures and experience." ³⁰

Whether he considers the position of a monarch to be granted by God is unknown – if so, it would be an additional cause for his reference to God and faith.

The change of title to "Defender of Faith" would be a departure from the principal role of the Anglican Church within British society, as the special relation between the Monarch and the Anglican Church would be replaced by a patronage of different faiths. One has to keep in mind that the Crowns of England and Scotland are related to specific religious positions and restrictions, e.g. it is impossible for Catholics to become crowned in Britain. The ending of the primacy of the Anglican Church would re-define Englishness in interfering with some of these traditions.

While the Abrahamic religions³¹ find preference in his speeches and commentaries, the personal beliefs of Prince Charles are never specified. In his work the distinctive issues of various religions and faiths are pointed out – often in direct comparison to related but different ideas in other religions. Thus his references allow for a comparison of different sets of beliefs to find common ground – just as the Protestant definition of Christian faith demands. Also, his comparative explanations usually are published³² and might help to make the believers of the different faiths feel more at home in Britain's society.

In the case of Prince Charles one likely motive for his actions is the conservation of power of his family. As the United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy, the Prince of Wales wields no official powers at all – but his personal influence (added to by the probability of his becoming King) and his power as one of the principal land owners of Great Britain.

³⁰ Ian Bradley: "Queen of Diversity" Guardian, 03.06.2002.

³¹ This refers to religions that stem from the prophet Abraham. The largest groups are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all of these differentiate into many smaller divisions.

³² In the mass media or at least on his homepage: <<http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/>>

Both, Tony Blair and Prince Charles, are utilising faith issues. Either for personal advantage or for influencing the development of society. Both draw from the wide variety of faiths and religions of post-colonial Britain for the illustration of their speeches.

Tony Blair seems to seek a position for himself by entering the circles of international philanthropic founders by taking on inter-faiths-dialogue, as that field of action was vacant.³³ Prince Charles offers insights into the different faiths and their belief-systems in his speeches by introducing the public to issues and persons central to the individual faiths.³⁴ He is concerned about the social separation in consequence of secularisation and the seclusion and extremism that develops as reaction to that.

According to Protestant beliefs, there is a difference between human work and God's work (Rechtfertigungslehre). Faith itself is God's work. Confessions are seen as human interpretations of God's works. Not only church organisation but also its teachings and agreements are made by man (mostly: men) and fallible. Therefore there is freedom of individual faith within the Christian faith that is transported via the gospel. And this, finally, demands Protestant faith to be ecumenical in principle.³⁵

Prince Charles is representing this principle in his work and attitude, whereas Tony Blair is not. In some aspects it sounds closely related, in other circumstances his descriptions are ultra-Catholic and convinced of their leading role amongst religions – not a good start to work for true cooperation of the faiths.

As we have seen in the above, the two examples are very disparate, indeed. Both have repeatedly be called "defender of faith" – but were on entirely different roads: Tony Blair used faith tactically to convince people of his position and for show-effects. He has left the Church of England immediately after leaving office, and is looking for a position that puts him close to the high and influential jet-set. On the opposite, Prince Charles accumulates and compares examples of faithfulness to define common ideas of the creeds. He is trying to stabilise society by improving its integrativeness by making "the Other" accessible.

Monarchy, contested as it is, still is the ideological unifier – the common ground – of British society. It has constantly to be modernised to remain the common denominator of a secular

³³ "Tony Blair didn't do God in Downing Street. Now he's making up for lost time." The Times, 08.04.2008.

³⁴ Examples for the variety of his speeches: <<http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/>>

³⁵ EKD: Identität und Verständigung, Eine Denkschrift. Gütersloh:1995, 65.

and pluralistic society. And: it has to integrate those parts of society that are not associated with the Church of England that is only one of the creeds in contemporary Britain. The field of faith and religion offers itself as area for expressing common interests and interest in the diversity of the citizenry.

Prince Charles, by expressing his position on religion, is leading the way on the re-invention of the Monarchy. By this, he cares for two issues central for British identity: its Monarchy and the integration of its cultural diversity. He continues to articulate the values of a tolerant society and thus provides a focus and common ground for a multi-cultural society and religious plurality. This development has been taken up by the Queen more and more openly in her speeches:

"We all have something to learn from one another, whatever our faith – be it Christian or Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh – whatever our background, whether we be young or old, from town or countryside." ³⁶

The future of the Monarchy depends on a power-basis and common understanding of its worth for society. In working for that common ground, Prince Charles is defining and establishing that understanding of the Monarchy's importance for the future of British society.

The question remains, how far the religious positions described are representing related developments in Great Britain. A Gallup poll in early 2008 suggested the continuous decline of the Anglican Church in membership and influence. It did not show the extent of individual beliefs not catered for by the major churches nor the individually developed systems of beliefs (D-I-Y-creeds). Whether the current climate of recession and the growing awareness of environmental problems will lead to a mass-return to the established churches, as recorded in the past, remains to be seen. [In the words of Karl Marx, taken from just before the notorious "opium"-quote: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation." ³⁷]

Tony Blair has disappointed many people by jettisoning most of the issues, he claimed to stand for, including his alleged understanding of the equality of the beliefs that are influencing British culture today.

³⁶ H.M. The Queen: Christmas Broadcast 2001. Quoted in: Ian Bradley: "Queen of Diversity" Guardian, 03.06.2002.

³⁷ Karl Marx: Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.

And finally a last example for influencing public opinion by referring to belief-systems and their cultural connotations: With many people in Northern Europe, western interpretations of Buddhist ideas are quite popular.³⁸ There have been rumours in the press that Prince Charles is leaning towards Buddhism, too. These rumours have not been substantiated, his official position is ecumenical and in line with the Anglican Church. But the rumours increased his appeal to western intellectuals, who have a vague understanding of Buddhism, who care about Tibet, but hardly about the Anglican Church and not openly about the Monarchy.

Both are labeled "defenders of faith", but are representing opposed views on and positions in society. Blair is on the fundamentalist fringe, Prince Charles in the pluralist centre. Blair has discredited his alleged multi-cultural politics by showing the irrationality of his personal faith and its anti-pluralism. Prince Charles increases his personal credibility and the public trust in the Monarchy, he stands for, by offering an umbrella to the pluralist society in moderating inter-faith-dialogue etc. He defends faith in general as it is safeguarding the established social stability.

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³⁸ E.g.: the "barefoot Doctor" column by Stephen Russel in the Observer combined a western form of Taoism with esoteric and popular psychology-positions and intends to advise on difficulties of everyday life in western cities.