

## **Speech by Stephen Timms MP at Young Fabians meeting, House of Commons, 24 April 2006**

There are plenty of people around today who point out the dangers of politics and religion getting mixed up. From Belfast to Baghdad, there is no shortage of object lessons to warn us. But I want today to argue the diametrically opposite point of view. Faith is a great starting point for politics. Increasingly the Labour Party needs to engage with faith, and to look to people of faith to renew and reshape our political vision.

My usual Sunday routine is to attend my church fellowship, and then to turn to my ministerial red boxes at home in the afternoon. Last Sunday was different. I went to three constituency events.

In the morning, I had accepted an invitation to the St George's Day service at St George's Church, East Ham. There were I suppose sixty or seventy children and adults present. At half past one I was at the start of the annual Sikh Vaisakhi procession starting at the Rosebury Avenue Gurdwara in Manor Park and involving over ten thousand people during the course of the afternoon. At four I was at Lister School for the annual commemoration by the local Indian Buddhist community of the birth of Dr Ambedkar, the Indian law minister after Independence who drafted the constitution of India and converted to Buddhism at the end of his life. It is probably just as well for my ability to keep on top of my red boxes that another engagement - an election meeting with members of the Shah Jalal mosque in Manor Park - did not in the end take place.

Four different meetings, four different faiths - and each one of them attracting significantly greater participation than any of the party meetings I have attended recently.

When I was growing up, the one thing you could say with confidence about faith was that it was on the decline. There were no doubt still some elderly spinsters cycling to evensong, as John Major expressed it, but they were a dwindling minority. It would surely be only a matter of time before faith attendance would be on a par with membership of the Flat Earth Society, and with about as much influence.

But how different it looks today. People like me whose job it is to understand the concerns of my constituents and to help them achieve their aspirations are finding increasingly that we have to relate to people at faith events and on a faith basis. There are not fewer people in Britain who define their identity in terms of faith, but more.

And that is the basis on which they wish to be engaged. For many, although faith is a personal matter, they are not prepared to confine it to being a private matter. It necessarily compels them to service and engagement in the public sphere.

And while the number for whom this is the key to their identity is no doubt quite small, it does appear that a far higher proportion than I had ever assumed do align themselves with one or other of the faith groups. The Treasury is the department responsible for the census, and when I was a Treasury minister, against tough Tory resistance, we included a voluntary question about faith in the 2001 census. I was astonished that 72% said they were Christians, 3% said they were Muslims - only 10% said they had no faith and another 10% declined to answer the question.

Perhaps the most important popular political movement in Britain of the last few years has been the Jubilee 2000 - Make Poverty History movement. It was not by any means an exclusively faith based movement, but its origins were certainly in faith, and its organisers confirm that 80% of the people who actually took part in demonstrations and postcard writing - the people who actually contributed to changing the political environment - were from the churches. And those are the people who are responsible for the announcement by Gordon Brown and Hillary Benn two weeks ago that the UK will spend £8 billion on education in the developing world over the next ten years, compared with £2 billion over the last ten.

It was a remarkable achievement. As Will Hutton commented in the Observer about Jubilee 2000, *"The Left of Centre should take note: its no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world - its Leviticus"*.

People often suggest that faith is a divisive issue in multi-cultural Britain. In reality, of course, the opposite is true. The Catholic priest at St Antony's Church Forest Gate told me recently that his congregation of 1600 people includes now 96 nationalities. A third of my constituents are Muslims. They come from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, the Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Kosovo and the former Soviet republics. They may at first sight have very little in common - but their faith, which for many is the most important thing about them, is held in common. It is building cohesion between them. And the faiths in practice get on much better between each other than people often think - actually seeing each other as allies.

Our party needs to engage with today's progressive movements, just as in the past. We need electoral support, of course, but we also need new ideas, new activists, new impetus from them as well. And increasingly, it is to the faith movements and organisations that in practice we need to look - just as in the past, when for example, of the 29 Labour MPs newly elected in 1906, 18 were committed non-conformist Christians.

So I welcome the initiative being taken by my colleague Andy Reed, MP for Loughborough, in setting up over the next couple of months a website for Christians who support the Labour Party to debate ideas and policies.

And I had similar aims in mind when I took the lead three years ago in setting up Muslim Friends of Labour, now chaired by my colleague Mohammed Sarwar MP. I know a lot of young, able, British born Muslims who want to be politically active and effective but for whom being a Muslim is the starting point. It is not easy for them to engage with British politics. So the idea of Muslim Friends of Labour was to provide a forum where being a Muslim was taken as read, but where people could debate politics and contribute to Labour's debates.

We will need to do a lot more of that as a party as faith becomes increasingly salient. We need to relate to people on their terms, not ours - and to acknowledge the centrality of faith in their lives. And it will be good for us and good for politics to do it.

Thank you.