

# God on our side?

*Phil Jump notes the apparent ease with which God can be recruited to support quite opposing causes. He suggests that ours is not the task of thoughtlessly declaring religious justification for what we have already decided is right, but of humbly and carefully considering how the values and traditions of our faith inform the agendas of today's world.*

The recent COP climate talks (COP 29 November 2024) seem to have pulled something of a last-minute rabbit out of a hat, achieving a level of agreement, albeit that it seemed to be the most precarious attempt so far. While many nations continue to express a degree of discontent at the eventual outcome, this particular conference seems to have brought into focus not only the mounting climate crisis, and the financial imbalances that exacerbate it, but significant questions about the validity and purpose of COP itself.

Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary-General and Christiana Figueres, former executive secretary of the UN Convention on Climate Change, were joined by a chorus of experts and activists in an open letter which described the current COP structures as no longer fit for purpose.

Concerns had begun to emerge when it was rumoured that some delegates had used the run up to the event as an opportunity to negotiate significant fossil fuel supply contracts, pretty much in the face of COP's stated purpose. Things were further exacerbated by a somewhat bizarre introductory speech from the host nation's president, Ilham Aliyev, when he defended Azerbaijan's intention to significantly expand its exports of natural gas, describing such resources as "a gift from God" that needed to be shared.

While there is much to be said about the environmental concerns that such


realities generate, I want to particularly focus on the religious narrative that Aliyev sought to generate. What makes it notable is that the concept of a Creator, which underpins so many world religions, tends to incline most adherents to share prevailing concerns about sustainability and emission reduction, not to advocate greater consumption of natural gas! To believe in a Creator God is largely perceived to give rise to a responsibility to act as stewards and guardians rather than consumers and distributors of the earth's resources.

What this illustrates is the apparent ease with which God can be recruited to support quite opposing causes. As I reflected on this latest example, I was reminded of those conversations that individuals attempted to draw me into some years ago in the run up to the 'Brexit' referendum. While some Christian believers were quite horrified by the xenophobia and nationalism that they perceived to underpin the leave campaign, thus seeing Remain as the only legitimate Christian option, others spoke with equal conviction of a responsibility to restore our nation's sovereignty and identity by voting Leave. Again, my purpose is not to defend or counter either argument, but to note how easily each was equated with Christian responsibility and purpose.

Moral high ground seems to be an increasingly sought after commodity in modern politics. Even without any religious attachments, it is interesting

to note the constant narrative from a recently elected socialist government in the UK claiming it is putting things right, while exactly the same justification is attached to a significantly right-wing agenda being promised by the incoming president across the Atlantic. Some might argue that this further underlines why faith and politics don't mix - rather than informing any perspective or choice, it simply serves to intensify existing divisions.

A story was often told in my time at theological college, when its founder Charles Spurgeon described a student preacher as having "used the Bible in the way that a drunk uses a lamp post", explaining this comparison as being "more for support rather than illumination". A century or so later, in the public arena rather than the pulpit, it seems that some continue to display that tendency.

So rather than seeking to shun faith from politics, or simply enlist divine endorsement for our already determined opinions, people of faith perhaps need to take Spurgeon's reproach to heart. Ours is not the task of thoughtlessly declaring religious justification for what we have already decided is right, but of humbly and carefully considering how the values and traditions of our faith inform the agendas of today's world, expecting to be challenged ourselves in the process. Faith has much to say to the world of business, commerce and politics, but it has to be more than mere servant of its existing agendas. 



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