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Tim Farron, Conservative Evangelicalism and the public sphere

Tim Farron resigned as leader of the Liberal Democrats last week saying that he felt it was no longer possible to reconcile his faith and his leadership. Here ***Anna Strhan*** *explores her recent research on Evangelical Christians finding that a deeper understanding of the nuances and varieties of contemporary evangelicalism in the UK is needed.*

Image: Flickr, Liberal Democrats

In his resignation speech as leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron said that he found himself 'torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader.' The faith of numerous other politicians, such as Ruth Davidson, David Lammy, or Theresa May, show that there is no intrinsic incompatibility between Christianity and political office.

It was rather Farron's particular kind of evangelical faith that made him an object of suspicion, and meant that he spent much of the early part of the general election campaign being repeatedly interrogated about his views on gay sex and abortion rather than about Liberal Democrat policies. Farron argued that his personal views were not relevant – that being a liberal was about defending the rights and liberties of those who held different beliefs. Others in the media and his own party disagreed, with Brian Paddick resigning as Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary 'over concerns about the leader's views on various issues that were highlighted during GE17'. Farron has not kept his faith out of the public sphere. He stated in an interview in the Daily Mail in 2015 that he believes that heaven and hell really exist, and that heaven is a physical entity. Yet his awkward responses to questions probing his views about gay sex and abortion, before his eventual statement that he did not believe gay sex is a sin, showed his keen self-awareness over which conservative evangelical beliefs are unpalatable in contemporary British society.

In my research with a conservative evangelical congregation in London, church members I spoke with were similarly acutely aware of which of their moral standpoints were unpopular, and they often performed a similar self-censorship. In a question and answer session following a sermon at a Sunday evening service, the church's rector stated that the 'social and political tectonic plates of Britain are shifting radically, as we move from once-Christian – at least nominally – through to post-Christian Britain…' He then asked the congregation, 'given that the tectonic plates are

beginning to shift, well, are you not finding that to speak openly of your faith, to make mention publicly of your views of sexuality, or gender, or other faiths, the absolute supremacy of Christ and the impossibility of salvation through any other religion…, are you not finding that as you say these kind of things, you're facing increasing hostility?' This question implied that individuals there *were* saying things that provoked hostility. Yet the majority of those I spoke with – like Farron – preferred to avoid conversations about any of these issues with individuals outside the church.

Their strategic preference not to speak publicly about their views about sexuality was troubled however when, like Farron, individuals were directly asked about their beliefs. Two women in their early twenties I interviewed, Jo and Rhiannon, described times when they had been asked about their views on homosexuality and had experienced difficulty expressing these. Rhiannon, who worked in the theatre, said a gay colleague had asked her whether she thought he was going to hell. Describing her response, she said, 'I was really shocked and really upset … I don't think I said anything at that point, partly because I think I was almost crying. But then, afterwards, I went back and said, "look, I don't think you're going to hell because you're gay, … actually, if you've been told that, then that's a wrong perception of Christianity'. She said she thought negative perceptions of evangelical Christianity in the theatre were due to its being seen as judgmental: 'the theatre is very postmodern, and it's a faux-pas to say that you disagree with someone's belief or lifestyle choice'. Jo described a time when one of her colleagues had asked her in front of several other colleagues what she thought about the Bulls, the bed and breakfast owners who were taken to court by a couple in a civil partnership, Steven Preddy and Martyn Hall, for refusing to allow them a double room, a case widely reported in the British press. She said she had replied 'people can have a personal view, but we should abide by the law', and when asked directly what her views on homosexuality were, she had said, 'I have views', without revealing what those were, adding, 'I was a bit chicken about it'.

While some Christians and Christian organizations do seek to impose the tenets of their faith in relation to these kinds of moral issues on wider society, many of those at the church I studied were critical of this approach. A lawyer I spoke to, for example, expressed the liberal sense that the government 'should not tell people how to live, but [should] give me the freedom to live as I choose without interference with others.' Others were also critical of Christian organizations that have sought to frame Christian political engagement in relation to issues of sexuality or the family, or those that have argued that Christians are being unfairly marginalized in the name of equality. Liz, a member of the church staff, for example, argued that this kind of approach ended up highlighting 'right-wing issues and ignor[ing] issues that actually the Bible says a lot about… I would think care for the poor and the vulnerable in society is quite important, and … I tend to think that the state as a whole has a responsibility to that. I mean, that's a political conviction, you know, I think I would argue that the Bible has a lot to say about care for the poor.' Overall, I found that what it meant to be a conservative evangelical in these individuals' everyday lives was shaped through the complex intersection of their sense of relationship with God and with each other, their being addressed in the church by traditionalist moral teachings – including those on issues such as gender, sexuality and other religions in tension with secular modernity – and their simultaneous inhabiting of liberal, pluralist spaces in wider society that led them to experience these teachings as a cultural taboo that they are, in most of the everyday spaces they inhabit, unwilling to transgress.

Farron and many of my informants had felt that it was possible to be a conservative Christian and a liberal. However their shared awkwardness about expressing particular conservative Christian beliefs suggests their sense that wider society is not especially liberal when it comes to their holding these as private beliefs. The fact that after the election campaign Farron felt it no longer possible to reconcile his faith and his leadership of 'a progressive, liberal party in 2017' invites debate about the meaning of liberalism today. It is understandable that anyone who has experienced homophobia would be naturally suspicious of anyone who views another's sexuality as sinful, as David Laws argued in response to Farron's resignation. While the wider electorate may not have cared that much about Farron's personal beliefs, the young and well-educated voters the Liberal Democrats were competing for were more likely to care than most, and this is what perhaps mattered in the end. The media's particular focus on Farron's views as an

evangelical – in contrast with the scant interest in May's Anglican faith – has the potential to fan a persecution narrative amongst some evangelicals. This is a narrative that many other evangelicals feel uncomfortable about, though they may not voice this ambivalence publicly. What is needed is a deeper understanding of the nuances and varieties of contemporary evangelicalism in the UK, and the ways in which this is very different from the interrelations between evangelical faith and politics in other global contexts such as the US.

About the author

Anna Strhan is a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Kent. She is the author of *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals* and co-editor of *Religion and the Global City* and *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion and Childhood*.

Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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