

Is there an alternative evangelical position to the Christian right?

The right

Until it became a term claimed by the media to describe some Muslims groups, “fundamentalist” was used to describe Christians who took a very literal interpretation of the Bible, especially those passages associated with creation. Fundamentalist Christians were often stereotyped as southern United States Baptists to indicate the strictness of their interpretations and the codes of moral behaviour that they pursued. The political right grew from such traditions and now encompasses conservative Catholics, protestants and even some secular groups who stand for moral absolutes based on their set of values, no separation of public and private lives, hard work, a government that encourages moral action and does not interfere in the lives of people, and patriotic support for ones country.

But, in recent years there has been a shift in the media description to label these views of a Christian right as “evangelical Christians” dropping the “fundamentalist” tag. In the aftermath of the 2004 elections in both the United States and Australia, the media spoke of the evangelical Christian right who had turned out in numbers to counter the Democrat’s tactic of enrolling and encouraging vast numbers of new voters to actually vote. In the Australian media, similar responses were seen with a strong focus on the NSW seat of Greenway, a supposedly strong Labor seat, which had fallen to the Liberals through a member of the Hillsong Church. This view has more recently been taken up in an article “Howard’s way” by Philip Adams.

Since the events of 9/11/2001, the electorate in most western countries has turned to a more conservative base rejecting the values relativism of post-modernism and yearning for a return to surety in values, traditions, national identity and a sense of belonging. In these circumstances, religion has prospered and countered the predictions of the secular humanists in western countries, that religion would become benign, if not irrelevant, as higher living standards in the consumer society met the needs of people and took away their need for religion.

But are all evangelical Christians happy about being labelled as the evangelical Christian right? Is there a Christian left? And more importantly, can there be an evangelical Christian left?

The left

There are a number of people who are happy to paint a Christian left. It is a political group that has typically left concerns for peace, justice, equality, human rights and the rejection of excessive wealth. Its Biblical base is in works and the teachings of Jesus Christ, which in isolation from the rest of the Bible, are often translated into a social gospel to which many secular humanists are also attracted. It has a good dose of liberation theology, is global in orientation and worldwide includes many Catholics, Anglican, Uniting and other Christians with similar concerns. It is not often evangelical.

The discussion of left and right is a political one not a theological one. Many Christians can identify with the left on one issue and with the right on another. However, generally speaking, individual Christians do identify more with one side than another. But I feel caught between a rock and a hard place. I am drawn to both positions for different reasons. As an evangelical, I yearn for some aspects of the right, but don’t like how much of their theology is applied in the real world, and I respect the left for its emphasis on social justice and human rights, but their

theology is not mine. Is there a different position, an evangelical Christian left or am I just seeking the middle ground?

Positioning Christians in a political field.

The language of left and right is the language of politics. Even when applied to other organizations, including the church, it has political overtones and speaks of factions. Of greater interest is any attempt to characterize the left and the right as supporting particular political positions. The following table is one view:

ISSUE	CHRISTIAN LEFT	CHRISTIAN RIGHT
Capitalism	Government intervention Equity driven issues towards socialism	Freedom of the individual Doctrine driven Market controlled
Trade unions	Compulsory membership Welfare oriented Distrust of management	Anti-union Individual contracts Collective bargaining
Public schooling	Equality of access Funding by need Egalitarian	User pay Competition Freedom of choice
Middle east	Support Palestine	Support Israel
Immigration	Less selective More accepting of refugees and illegal immigrants	Strict application of rules Want more like us Want limit on numbers
Family	Support broader definition Support social welfare	Focus on nuclear family Traditional family values Self supporting policies lead to smaller families
Law and order	Promotes alternatives to imprisonment Protects human rights Promotes support groups	More prisons Mandatory sentencing Truth in sentencing More powers to police
Charity	Supports the sharing of resources Global oriented Supports underprivileged Debt forgiveness	Expects people to help themselves Reluctant to share resources Maintains economic power
War	Anti-war, support peace More reticent to be involved Anti-nuclear	Right to impose desired political system or government on others Opposes difference See military solution to human problems

As previously expressed, Christians may find themselves right on some issues and left on others, or even that they hold some left and right views simultaneously. But such positions are of no interest to the media whose desire to stereotype over-rides common sense. To carve out a different territory for evangelical Christians it will be necessary to generalise and develop a position that holds onto evangelical theology, but with different arguments for application.

The evangelical Christian left?

To start the debate, what might the evangelical left position be, compared to the evangelical right, on the issues above:

ISSUE	EVANGELICAL LEFT	EVANGELICAL RIGHT
Capitalism	Government intervention has a place in market driven economies to protect the exploited.	Freedom of the individual Doctrine driven Market controlled.
Trade unions	Unions have their place in protecting the rights and conditions of workers	Anti-union Individual contracts Collective bargaining
Public schooling	A strong well resourced public school system provides equity.	User pays Competition Freedom of choice
Indigenous peoples	Acknowledge the realities and supports access to resources and local decision making.	Help themselves Don't accept responsibility for their current status
Middle East	Opposes terrorism and military aggression.	Support Israel
Immigration	Sets generous targets and act with compassion towards refugees and illegal immigrants	Strict application of rules Want more like us Want a limit on numbers
Family	Supports traditional family values and recognizes the reality of different family types.	Focus on nuclear family. Traditional family values. Self-supporting policies lead to smaller families.
Law and order	Promotes alternatives to imprisonment but upholds strictly the rule of law.	More prisons Mandatory sentencing Truth in sentencing More powers to police
Charity	Be generous towards others and maintain their dignity.	Expects people to help themselves Reluctant to share Protects economic power
War	Recognises war as a last resort and questions any right to invade another country. Anti-nuclear	Right to impose desired political system or government on others See military solution to human problems

John Gore

The Christian Right - a grass roots view

My atheist friend, Alan, was chairing our weekly current affairs discussion just after the Howard Government's election victory. The twenty of us were vigorously discussing the influence of the Christian Right when Alan turned to me and said, *Steve, tell us what you told me a few weeks ago about the early leaders of the union movement.*

At first I didn't see any connection with the recent election but I told our group: *A hundred years ago William Spence was perhaps Australia's greatest union organiser and he was also a Methodist lay preacher who often made references to Jesus in his union speeches. The first Labor Premier of NSW, "Honest" Jim McGowen, was Sunday School superintendent in Redfern and very much encouraged in his union activism by his rector, Bertie Boyce.*

The discussion moved on until Jane, an agnostic, unexpectedly got a word in. *Steve's right, she said, my grand father was an early union leader in New Zealand and he also was a very devout Christian.* Others nodded in agreement.

I was left wondering why people of no religion seemed to be reassured that evangelicals had once been active in working for social justice. Our group is made up of older folk who are concerned for truth and integrity in government, for justice and compassion towards asylum seekers and for strengthening our community through public education and public health services. All of these values are Biblical principles. They were the basis for the efforts of the early Christian union leaders. By contrast, most of my church friends base their social ethics on their drive for respectability and on "freedom of choice" for individuals and their families. So Christians today urgently need to rediscover the teaching of the Old Testament on justice and peace and to realise that God created humans to live together in community. Therefore John Gore's articles in TCF News provide an important contribution.

However, do such debates have any relevance for our schools? In the case of Special Religious Education (SRE) or *Scripture*, the volunteer SRE teachers depend on the goodwill of the classroom teachers and we are very grateful for the very high level of goodwill that makes SRE possible. It would be a tragedy if this goodwill were to be jeopardised by gung-ho Christian Right spokespeople who undermined public schools or whose anti-union rhetoric threatens the Teachers Federation.

Steve Howes

The story so far

The Christian Right has its origins in Fundamentalist Christianity. The media has observed the rise of both fundamentalist Christian churches and evangelical churches and has been unable to distinguish between them. This has resulted in evangelicals being stereotyped as fundamentalist right Christians, a position that not all evangelicals are comfortable with.

"Left" and "right" descriptions are political descriptions. The Christian left is characterized by concerns for peace, justice, equality, human rights and the rejection of excessive wealth. It is often liberal in theology and does not represent an alternative for evangelicals uneasy or unhappy about being labeled with the Christian right.

An evangelical left position might still be considered politically right by most but such a position can be distinguished. In the following table these positions are identified from the first article with the addition of some scriptural references. The text that follows attempts to distinguish the evangelical left position from the evangelical right based on similar or different perspectives of these scriptures.

This analysis is not exhaustive, but indicative, to help readers distinguish different positions. Further study and consideration of these scriptures is recommended.

ISSUE	EVANGELICAL LEFT	BIBLE	EVANGELICAL RIGHT
Capitalism	Government intervention has a place in market driven economies to protect exploited.	Luke 19:1-9, 11-27 Matt 25: 14-29 Matt 22:15-22	Freedom of the individual Doctrine driven Market controlled.
Trade unions	Unions have their place in protecting the rights and conditions of workers	Acts 2:42-47 Mark 6: 30-44 Matt 19:8	Anti-union Individual contracts Collective bargaining
Indigenous peoples	Acknowledge the realities and supports access to resources and local decision making.	Acts 2:5-12 Acts 10	Help themselves Don't accept responsibility for their current status
Middle East	Opposes terrorism and military aggression.	Matthew 5	Support Israel
Immigration	Sets generous targets and acts with compassion towards refugees and illegal immigrants	Ruth	Strict application of rules Want more like us Want limit on numbers
Family	Supports traditional family values and recognizes the reality of different family types.	Romans 16:10-11 1Cor.1:11,16 and 16:15 Matt 10:35-36 and 19:5, 14-15 Eph 5:31-33 and 6:4	Focus on nuclear family Traditional family values Self supporting policies lead to smaller families

John Gore