

Book Review: Faith, Politics, and Belonging: A Reflection on Identity, Complexity, Simplicity, and Obsession¹

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Faith, Politics, and Belonging is a timely, enjoyable and moving set of essays, articles and talks by Ian Geary, a self-confessed Christian socialist, thinker and political activist. Geary has been an energetic and thoughtful voice in what has become known as the 'Blue Labour' movement in UK politics in the last two decades. 'Blue Labour' was a term coined by academic and politician Lord Maurice Glasman in 2009 to represent what he perceived to be an older but forgotten tradition of work, faith, family, and country, essentially a 'postliberal' politics to challenge the dominance of social liberalism since the 1960s and economic liberalism since the 1980s. These ideas were explored in a collection of essays by thinkers in 2015, which was co-edited by Geary: *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*.²

One of the criticisms of this movement is that it has been too academic and divorced from practical policies to get a proper hearing in the UK political landscape. In short, it has sometimes lacked narrative and practical content. In light of this, Geary's book is a welcome contribution, helping flesh out what a politics could actually look like that represents where much of the electorate is but finds little representation. Geary is insistent that there is an alternative between "right-wing populism and now so-called 'Christian Nationalism' on one hand and an out of touch, technocratic, progressive social liberalism on the other."³ This alternative needs to be shaped by historical figures like Tony Benn, George Lansbury, George Orwell and Keir Hardy, and is associated with contemporary thinkers like John Milbank, Anna Rowlands and Maurice Glasman, according to Geary.

The book is split into three main sections as outlined in the title, each representing a key tenet of Blue Labour or post-liberal thinking, with half a dozen or so articles in each. The 'Faith' section is an extended reflection on the importance of faith (more specifically Christian faith) in developing a vision for developing a common life together which liberalism has failed to foster. The section on 'Politics' is more concerned with the intellectual and practical foundations of the UK Labour party and how it lost its way. Geary helpfully balances personal experience of activism and

¹ Ian Geary. *Faith, Politics, and Belonging: A Reflection on Identity, Complexity, Simplicity, and Obsession*. (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2024).

² Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (eds). *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*. (London/New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2015).

³ Geary, *Faith*, xiii.

involvement in party conferences for instance, and an accessible account of the philosophical errors of a party which has largely been commandeered by an elite political and managerial class. The 'Belonging' section attacks a liberalism that denigrates the importance of place and advocates for a more relational and tradition-informed politics. The subject matter within these three overarching sections ranges from explorations of larger themes like the common good, to more specific discussion of issues like euthanasia and welfare reform. The Bible is frequently cited (not a given in much 'Christian political' discourse!) and Geary speaks authoritatively and in a way that traverses the all-too-frequent gap between a world of policy and politico's and real communities which politics is supposed to serve.

I found this book compelling and think it has much to contribute in this moment of endless culture wars and increasing political uncertainty. Geary's prose is easy to read, full of personal anecdotes and moments of joviality - on commenting on liberals' insistence for a second Brexit referendum he comments (despite himself voting to Remain): "I don't like the fact that West Brom lost to Aston Villa in the playoffs, but they did, and I don't think there should be a People's Playoff to revisit or confirm the result. It is what happened."⁴ He is able to weave together strands that rarely go together in the popular imagination: evangelical Christianity, socialism, community organising and Catholic Social Teaching to name but a few. He also avoids trite stereotypes of liberalism, asserting that, a "critique of liberalism is not to diminish decent liberalism and become populist and shrill."⁵

I confess to writing this review in light of reading Paul Kingsnorth's much debated recent lecture "Against Christian Civilization,"⁶ in which he presents an 'uncivilized' Jesus who tells his followers not to 'get good jobs and save prudently... generate wealth... defend our frontiers... resist evil... [or] be responsible citizens.' While I am largely sympathetic to the postliberal project, I for one, sometimes struggle to square certain of its key goals and aims with this more radical and plain reading of the gospels. Jesus does not seem to speak too much about the building of institutions and in Kingsnorth's reading he would certainly not fit neatly into any nation-building programme like Blue Labour.

Geary is not blind to such potential pitfalls. In the essay 'Politics – It's Just Stuff,' Geary rightly, in my view, outlines how politics can become all consuming for Christians in an unhealthy manner: 'Yet, there is a bigger story. It may be that the church re-evaluates, over time, its engagement with politics. Not to abandon it but to affirm its value and recognize its limits in a more

⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶ Paul Kingsnorth, "Against Christian Civilization," *First Things*, December 12, 2024, <https://firstthings.com/against-christian-civilization/>.

expansive sense of God's kingdom and perhaps to explore a different way of understanding politics. Politics though important, is not a be all and end all.⁷ The influence of Stanley Hauerwas is clear upon Geary and is perhaps why mentions of 'patriot' or 'patriotism' (normal staples of Blue Labour) are limited to just two in the entire book. I would like to hear more of Geary's thoughts on this matter.

How and to what extent the followers of Jesus should fight to establish the Kingdom of God remains a live issue for debate in political theology and theological politics. I think Geary does a good job of navigating these tempestuous and contested seas, ensuring that the penultimate and the ultimate are distinguished and put in their right place. This is an important book which raises crucial questions for our time, and it deserves a wide readership.

⁷ Geary, *Faith*. 38.