

# Interview with Tony Blair

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change: I believe that respect for the environment for the future generations is our responsibility as Christians. All these subjects are very much dominated by my faith. The Tony Blair Foundation aims to promote respect and understanding about the world's major religions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Judaism – and to show how faith is a powerful force for good in the modern world. I recall that I launched the Foundation in Westminster Cathedral to a Catholic audience.

*In the Middle East, do you think that your being Catholic is a help or a hindrance?*

I never found it a problem, I must say. Never. On the contrary, I often think that in the modern world being a person of faith makes it easier to relate to people of other faiths. At times the opposite is true too, that people are strongly opposed. But since today the faith world is under quite an aggressive attack from elements of secularization, people of different faiths sometimes join forces.

*In his last Encyclical Letter, "Caritas in Veritate", the Pope writes that: "The Christian religion and other religions can offer their contribution to development only if God has a place in the public realm, specifically in regard to its cultural, social, economic, and particularly its political dimensions" (n. 56). Do you think that today's world wants to listen to religion or prefers to ignore it?*

I think there is a conflict about it. Personally, I totally agree with what the Pope is saying in the Encyclical, a brilliant text that should be read and re-read. I consider that religion has a central, a unique part to play in society and in its development, in how we handle technology, for example. But I think it is also true that there is a conflict for many people are anxious to keep faith out of the public space. To maintain, as I do, that religion has an important role doesn't mean that there won't be disagreements: there are going to be disagreements between people on many, many difficult issues, where the Church might be on one side and political leaders on another. But I don't think this is the point. The point is that faith should have the right to come into this space and to speak. It should not be silent. So it's not simply important that these things are resolved in the right way, it's important that the voice of faith is not absent from the public debate (let us think of issues such as justice and solidarity among peoples and nations).

I've just come back from China, where I now spend a lot of time and it is fascinating to see the way in which China is striving to develop a path for itself in the future. It's not just about economics and social advancement, but it's also about rediscovering faith and philosophical traditions.

I have heard many speeches in China, there are speeches about Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and actually the Christian community in China, is increasingly open about itself.

China is a country that in many ways is at a different stage of development from our societies, so we might think that in this country there might be a prevalent tendency to say: "if we want to be truly advanced, truly developed, we should push religion out".

What is interesting is that, although there are these people who want this to happen, actually there are other voices saying quite the opposite. They are

saying "we must remember that we are an ancient civilization, and we have tradition of faith and philosophy that are not just about the State, the individual, but that are actually about the world of faith". And I think that this holds a quite important lesson for us.

*Personally I find that Islam's recent entry on the scene has completely changed the role of religion in politics today, the way in which we see them interrelated.*

I totally agree. In a way, it's the point of my Foundation. Even if someone is not a man of faith at all, he can surely understand the importance of faith and can understand that faith matters. We see what has happened in the world of Islam. There are people who say: "it has nothing to do with religion, but that's just nonsense. It has to do with religion. Of course it has.

*Again, in the Encyclical, Benedict XVI also writes that: "To desire the common good and strive towards it, is a requirement of justice and charity" (n. 7). What do you think about this, as a Catholic, as the former Prime Minister of Britain, as an important actor on the international scene, and as the probable future President of Europe?*

I agree. I think that if you are a political leader, you are subject to certain constraints and you are also seeking votes. That's democracy. But this is where the world of faith makes a unique contribution to me. The Catholic Church is following God's truth and I think the very important point the Pope is making is that people should understand that this is a Christian obligation. It may sometimes come into conflict with the world of politics, I experienced this as a political leader. Yet it is extremely important that this religious aspect be retained: and it is not by chance that the Pope writes that a humanism without God is inhuman. I think that what he means is that human affairs and the human process of reasoning are always limited unless they are infused with faith. At times they can even be dangerous.

*It may of course, be difficult to put into practice the politics Pope Benedict describes in "Caritas in Veritate".*

People often misunderstand politics. Politics is the interaction of idealism and realism. It's not usually the triumph of the one over the other. When in 2005 we decided to put poverty in Africa at the centre of the G8 Summit at Gleneagles, that was strongly supported by the Catholic Church and by John Paul II. And it was crucial. When we come to deciding how much money to give, whether we should do more, if we can do more, these are tough political questions that can lead to disagreement. But the fact that the argument is being made and is being supported by the Church, can actually help politicians to do the right thing. It does not remove all these difficult issues for them but it helps. So when I said to the British people: we must increase radically our help to Africa, it was a great help to me to have the Church saying publicly that this was a right thing, a good moral thing to do.

Obviously there were also people critical of spending money on others rather than on us.

*In Britain you have serious social problems, so it must not have been easy.*

Yes, it's true. But everyone has.

*Yes, but it's easier to see other people's problems rather than one's own!*

Yes!

*As a father of four, what do you think of the role of the father? How do you see the future of fatherhood in today's world?*

In the first place, I think that the role of fatherhood should be faced with responsibility and without arrogance. However good or smart I thought was, I always found being a father really difficult, and I still do.

Secondly, I obviously think that fa-



thers are important in families. And that they too are really important in bringing up the child.

Thirdly, I think that the whole concept of family is in some aspects being recovered. In this field too I think that the religious community and the Church have a role to play. Of course families have their problems, they break up, and that will continue to happen I'm afraid but I've always thought that the Church's instructions about the family were helpful. Of course, to make a marriage work is difficult. Yet I truly think that in all the changes that are happening even in social attitudes, it is necessary to rediscover that fatherhood is a responsibility and a necessity.

*How does it feel to know that your great-grand children will study your work in their history books?*

Somebody asked me this the other day, and it was the first time I ever thought about it. I know it sounds odd but I suppose this is true! I never think of myself like that. It depends of course on what they will read!

*Well, you really have done a lot of things!*

Yes. But my own inclination is always to focus on the future. It's not that I don't reflect on the past – there

are obviously many questions on which I reflect again and again – but I feel that I still have something to give, and I still feel that I have a life ahead of me, as well as behind me. So, maybe, I also think of all the judgements that history will make on various events, particularly the many conflicts I was involved in with Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Sarajevo – and so on. I just think: you can't be sure what judgement will be made, so there is no point in being obsessed about it.

*I am struck by your emphasis on the future. Of course, you came to Office when you were 44 years old, today you are still young. You have ended your work as Prime Minister with a lot of time before you. On the other hand, Italy's political leaders traditionally tend to be elderly so a politician who, at the end of a decade of government, is planning his professional future is unusual.*

Yes, but I think it's a good thing, actually. I feel that I have learned so much in these years. Having politicians who have come out of office young can be really useful. I suppose that Bill Clinton is one such, Aznar in Spain another. They really have a lot of experience to contribute.

*Will your wife turn to politics, as has happened in some countries?*

No, I don't think she's interested.

*But we need women in politics!*

It's true. We do need women in politics. It is necessary to insist!

*Moreover, for some time your country was governed by a woman, Margaret Thatcher, who was an interesting example of a female politician.*

Yes. Actually I do think that the prejudices against women are far less widespread than people generally suppose. I remember my father said to

me – he was a man of the old school – that the British people would never elect a woman Prime Minister. And instead they elected her three times!

*What was Tony Blair's dream when you were a child?*

My ambitions? I'm afraid they were very ordinary: I wanted to be a footballer or a rock-star!

*You never thought that you would have liked to become Prime Minister?*

I would have been absolutely horrified if someone had told me I was going to be a politician, up until the age of 20-21. My first two years at university were more about parties and rock and roll, than about politics.

*Do you remember the first time you voted? Did you feel really important, that the country needed you, as I did?*

Yes, I do! The first time I was at university: the 1974 elections. But the first vote that really made a difference was the vote for the referendum on Europe in 1975. I remember that I voted "yes" very consciously. I believed it was important for the future of my country. I remember it well. It was a very interesting moment.