



## The Blaikie Report: An Insider's Look at Faith and Politics

by Bill Blaikie. United Church Publishing House. 264 pp. \$21.95.

## Pulpit and Politics: Competing Religious Ideologies in Canadian Political Life

by Dennis Gruending. Kingsley Publishing Services. 256 pp. \$22.00.

reviewed by Jonathan Malloy, Associate Professor of Political Science, Carleton University

The relationship between religion and politics is always complicated. In Canada one of its most complex elements is the relationship between Evangelicals and the political left, especially the NDP. A century ago, it was common to associate Evangelicals with progressive politics and social reform agendas. The economic establishment was closely linked with the traditional mainline churches, while evangelicalism challenged the complacency of both. But today, while many Evangelicals still pursue social justice, evangelicalism is associated much more with the political right. For better or worse, "the evangelical left" sometimes sounds like an oxymoron.

There's more to the story, though, as shown in two recent books – Bill Blaikie's *The Blaikie Report: An Insider's Look at Faith and Politics* and Dennis Gruending's *Pulpit and Politics: Competing Religious Ideologies in Canadian Political Life*. Both authors are former New Democrat MPs who have something to say about the relationship between Christians, evangelical or otherwise, and politics. Yet they do so in very different ways.

As mentioned, "Evangelicals in politics" were once found mostly on the left. At the turn of the last century, Christians in Britain, the United States, and Canada were seized with the need to return a wicked world back to God, through a gospel of salvation but also more earthly efforts that expressed God's love. Morality underlay most social reform efforts of the period, embodied in such phrases as "rescue missions" for the downtrodden, or the original "What Would Jesus Do?" question posed in Charles Sheldon's 1897 novel, *In His Steps*. In both Canada and the United States, prominent crusaders such as Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan freely mixed evangelical beliefs, a social reform agenda, and partisan politics. The two were especially intertwined in the temperance movement, anti-prostitution efforts, and other areas where the two Christian notions of personal morality and caring for the poor were obviously connected.

The "social gospel" faded as an organized political movement in the United States (though in African-American churches it morphed into the civil rights movement). But it flourished in Canada, especially under the banner of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), formed in 1932. Ordained ministers such as J. S. Woodsworth and later Tommy Douglas sought political office as a natural extension of their spiritual mission. But the evangelical character of the social gospel faded: Woodsworth in particular had doubts about traditional Christian theology and gave up his Methodist ordination entirely. (In contrast, orthodox Evangelicals were very evident in the right-wing Social Credit tradition in Alberta and B.C., none more than long-time Alberta premier Ernest Manning.) By the 1960s, Christianity still held a strong place in the Canadian left, with Tommy Douglas becoming the first leader of the NDP in 1961, and other ministers-turned-politicians such as long-time Winnipeg MP Stanley Knowles. The theologically liberal United Church gained the informal reputation of "the New Democratic Party at prayer."

It was in this context that a recently ordained United Church minister named Bill Blaikie successfully ran for a Winnipeg parliamentary seat in 1979. Blaikie went on to win eight further elections and came second to Jack



Layton in the NDP's 2003 leadership race, stepping down from federal politics in 2008 and then promptly winning a Manitoba provincial by-election and serving in cabinet until his second political retirement in 2011. Blaikie has now written a reflection on his political years, *The Blaikie Report*. Somewhere between a personal memoir and a set of policy-wonk reflections, *The Blaikie Report* is subtitled *An Insider's Look at Faith and Politics*, and it makes clear that Blaikie's faith and his politics are deeply intertwined.

Blaikie's faith is closely tied to economic and social justice, and he identifies not only as a Christian but also as a socialist and a critic of capitalism. He cites "the original economic meaning of many of Jesus's parables and teachings" (51) and that salvation can "involve being saved not just from destructive personal behaviour, but also from destructive environmental policies, dangerous workplaces, and oppressive relationships" (50). He contrasts this mixing of religion and politics with the "culture wars" in both Canada and the United States, which have mobilized many Christians, especially Evangelicals, on issues such as abortion and gay rights. Blaikie suggests these "cultural" issues are distractions, "manipulated for political purposes to get people to vote for an agenda or political party that they would otherwise keep their distance from" (26) – that is, supporting a capitalist agenda that favours the wealthy and dominant. He laments that, throughout his political career, issues such as abortion "got in the way of building the support that would have been needed to challenge the dominant economic paradigm" (29).

But wait – there's more here than standard socialist cant. The most interesting aspect of *The Blaikie Report* is how the context for a dyed-in-the-wool socialist/NDP/United Church figure such as Blaikie has changed. He states the problem clearly: "Thirty years ago, I was focused on infusing my fellow Christians with the need for democratic socialism. Today, I find myself focusing on a need for left-wingers to appreciate the importance of a Christian tradition" (17). Having been accused of "Christian imperialism" after making a reference to the social gospel tradition at an NDP event, Blaikie is deeply concerned about the squeezing out of religious references in Canadian public life, and joins with others of all political stripes to raise this concern. He reminds those of the political left and right alike that "in the halcyon days of the social gospel, it was the left that was openly calling on Canada to be more Christian" (56).

Blaikie admits he doesn't always have the answers and sometimes feels pressed from all sides. He recalls his 2006 reaction when he was left out of a feature on "Christians in Politics" that featured only Conservatives ("What am I? Chopped liver?") and notes his status as the "token lefty" in a similar *Faith Today* article. But Blaikie says he often found himself on the fringe of his own party as well on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage: "I was often caught in the middle, wishing for the kind of certainty that others seemed to possess in abundance" (27) and was even "always a step or two behind my own [United] church" (30). He notes, for example, his preference for civil unions over full same-sex marriage rights, but that the subsequent debate was polarized over marriage alone, leaving no ground for his preferred middle option.

*The Blaikie Report* mixes the author's personal biography with a series of reflections on his experiences and views in different policy areas – medicare, the environment, aboriginal peoples, foreign policy, free trade, and others. In each, Blaikie shows the link between his faith and his socialist political beliefs. The result is a thoughtful and often gracious book. You don't win ten elections without certain skills, and *The Blaikie Report* wraps its sharp edge with a sense of statesmanship and respect. Particularly notable is Blaikie's reluctance to name his critics personally. Opponents are inevitably "certain people" or "some who disagreed with me," rather than being specifically named. When he does name names, Blaikie tries to find nice things to say, such as a kind reference to Stockwell Day in the opening pages.



Dennis Gruending, an MP for one term beginning in 1999, holds many of the same intertwined religious and political values as Blaikie. But the focus and tone of *Pulpit and Politics* is noticeably different. While Blaikie is concerned about the decline of religion entirely in political discourse, *Pulpit and Politics* makes a clear distinction between religious and political progressives (good) and their conservative opposites (bad). Gruending aggressively takes on Evangelicals and the political right in Canada (closely linked in his view), in what is essentially a sequel to Marci McDonald's 2010 book, *The Armageddon Factor*. Like McDonald, Gruending is determined to examine and expose the array of networks between Evangelicals, Conservatives, and the political right in Canada.

*The Blaikie Report* rarely refers specifically to Evangelicals at all, and Blaikie's strongest criticism is that Evangelicals have "a strange reluctance . . . to make a biblical argument for their politics, instead of just acting like the biblical grounding of their politics was self-evident" (25). It almost seems Blaikie wants more Bible-thumping from Evangelicals, not less. Gruending is much more confrontational. Evangelicals and "fundamentalists" – terms he uses interchangeably – get the full brunt of his criticism in the book, which presents Evangelicals as "them" and Gruending's readers as "us," e.g., "We must learn to understand these people" (34).

Like *The Armageddon Factor*, *Pulpit and Politics* often jumps to conclusions that support its argument, especially the assumption that attending an event means you agree with the views of everyone else in the room. For example, Gruending reports that Stockwell Day attended a stridently pro-Israel event in 2011 and made remarks supporting Israel's right to exist; he then infers from this that Day "choose[s] to ignore" the Oslo Accords and other recognitions of Palestinian self-determination (11). There's a strong sense of an Evangelical/Conservative semi-hidden conspiracy here, and the book lacks Blaikie's subtlety and nuances. In fact, at one point Gruending notes Trinity Western University's annual Mel Smith lecture series and its record of conservative speakers. But who delivered the 2012 Mel Smith lecture earlier this year? Step forward, Bill Blaikie.

Having said this, *Pulpit and Politics* also tries to present an alternative vision much like Blaikie's that involves other forms of Christianity and left-wing "progressive" politics. Gruending refers to the work of Citizens for Public Justice on the Alberta oil sands, the Catholic social justice tradition, and the international efforts of KAIROS (apart from the kerfuffle over its 2009 funding cut by the federal government). Like *The Blaikie Report*, there is a lot of inspiring and thoughtful material here regardless of one's politics and theology. The book is essentially a collection of short essays, many drawn from Gruending's blog of the same name (<http://www.dennisgruending.ca/pulpitandpolitics>); while this allows for easy bite-size reading, it also means a fair amount of repetition – the same things are introduced again and again – and some dated material, such as suggestions for the 2008 election debate or a look-ahead to Barack Obama's inaugural.

We hear a lot about the "Christian left" in these books. But what about the "evangelical left"? Is it indeed an oxymoron? Neither book gives a complete answer, though the authors recognize there are theological conservatives among them in the socialist ranks. There is an evangelical left, of course, but it comes in a few variations and can be hard to pin down. Most notably, many Evangelicals and groups (including the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada) are conservative on sexuality issues but more progressive on poverty and environmental issues, and don't fit well on the left-right scale at all.

A key problem between Evangelicals and many Christians on the political left is that they often seem to emphasize different aspects of faith. This really comes out in both books. Neither Blaikie nor Gruending really talks at all about his own personal faith journey. Not being Evangelicals, they don't automatically drift into the sort of personal testimonies that are so central to evangelicalism. Nor do they tie social justice and meeting the needs of the poor and oppressed directly to those individuals' spiritual conversion and rebirth – again, as Evangelicals often



do. Not surprisingly, this has led many Evangelicals to dismiss the social gospel as losing sight of the essential capital-G Gospel message of salvation.

Bill Blaikie directly addresses this concern near the end of his book: “It is said that we are too preoccupied with the horizontal dimension of reality, with the world that is, and pay too little attention to the vertical, to our relationship with God” (221). He rejects this dichotomy, first because “it presupposes that those of us on the Christian left have a flawed or somewhat inadequate spirituality” and second, that “one of the major signs of having your vertical relationship right is how much attention you pay to the world” and its problems. Undoubtedly many evangelical readers will itch to disagree with Blaikie. But it’s to Blaikie’s credit that he recognizes and addresses this criticism of the social gospel.

We also have to recall Blaikie’s other concern – that the political left has either forgotten about, or is embarrassed by, its own religious roots, seeing churches as anachronisms and only useful for housing soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Blaikie wants faith to continue to have a role in the public square, inspiring activists to action without imposing their beliefs on others. As he notes, “affirming a relationship between faith and politics is not the same as affirming any kind of relationship between religion and the state” (13). Many in the secular world don’t see this distinction, and even as Blaikie struggles to convince the more orthodox that he is still Christian, he is also trying to show his fellow leftists that religion can still have a role in politics. Is Blaikie fighting a losing battle in his own party? It’s not clear. Both he and Gruending discuss the NDP Faith and Social Justice Commission, set up in 2007 by Blaikie and other New Democrats including Catholic MP Joe Comartin as chair. But the Commission has a low profile and its impact is unclear. The recent NDP leadership race won by Thomas Mulcair was pretty much devoid of direct religious references or inspiration (though candidate Martin Singh served as president of the above Commission, and *Pulpit and Politics* includes an entry on candidate Paul Dewar’s views on faith and politics).

That said, Blaikie hasn’t thrown in the towel. In a recent letter in the new publication *Convivium*, he denies reports of his tradition’s death, arguing that “if anything, the relationship between faith and the advocacy of social and economic justice . . . is more visible and affirmed within the party than at any time in recent NDP history.” Blaikie blames “the persistence of the media in stereotyping the relationship between religion and politics as almost always on the political right” and vows to continue his struggle.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, these books leave us better informed, but also grasping for more. Too often, theological and political polarization go hand in hand, even when the real story is more complex. *Pulpit and Politics* unfortunately reflects this polarization, but *The Blaikie Report* demonstrates the common difficulties for Christians of reconciling faith with politics of any stripe.

---

<sup>1</sup>“On the Table: Ambushing the messenger” *Convivium* (March 1, 2012). <http://www.cardus.ca/convivium/article/3068>.