

Ebb and Flo and Me by the Sea

Richard Hall gave this talk as a 'warm-up' to the London SOFIC conference, held in March and entitled *Being Church – on a Rising Tide?*

Here we are at the seaside, swimming, surfing, sailing or just sitting in the sand wondering why poets always make the tide a *pathetic fallacy*. Does not Sophocles on the Aegean leap to mind, with Ebb & Flo Turbid? Perhaps not. Matthew Arnold at *Dover Beach*: the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing, roar' of the Sea of Faith? Ah, yes! In the same decade as *Dover Beach*, the 1860s, Ebb & Flo heard Pope Pius IX issue his Syllabus of Errors and assert Papal Infallibility (1870), and in 1907, heard Pius X with *Lamentabile Sane Exitu* condemn 100 years of biblical criticism. The Roman Catholic Church was launching itself *against* the tide of 19th century reason but the atheism of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud & Nietzsche was going *with* the flow.

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When Pope Benedict visited Britain in September, 2010, Ebb & Flo were there, fighting the rising tide of 'Aggressive Secularism' and 'Moral Relativism'. They knew of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and they didn't lament Christopher Hitchens' death!

They saw recently there are about 50 clerics in SOF, some still in service, who didn't want to leave the church to the tide of evangelicals. Like them or not, evos are in the church and evos stick: but are they a threat? We know evangelicals inhabit a few evo cathedrals like All Souls, Langham Place, and Holy Trinity, Eastbourne, where I was once Ebb & Flo's priest, but such churches are more like rock-pools than rising tides.

Cameron, Warsi, Pickles, Carey, and Ebb & Flo may say, 'We're a Christian country,' yet HM Queen, *Fidei defensatrix*, said far more about *faiths* than 'the Faith' last month. Then, on all figures available, the church is declining in Britain. Dr Peter Brierley said the proportion of the population in church membership has declined steadily since 1900, although a plateau has occurred in the last five years, and only 19 men were ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood in 2010.

Where I live now the figures are also on a small scale: village population, 300; church capacity, 150; average Sunday service, 15 diehards at conventional

services: God gets a mention; virgin birth and resurrection, in due season. But as the 15 diehards pass out through the lych gate – God vanishes. Talk returns to gossip, money, local politics but never God. After seven years in the village I've not heard God spoken of in a *believing* way. I've heard God mentioned in *discussions* – usually started by me – but God is mostly casual *blasphemy*, and as our Rector said, 'I patrol eight such villages, and I can't dam it, damn it!' So after seven years, I haven't noticed a rising tide of converts in our villages and the diehards are mostly – dying.

I lied when I said I hadn't heard God mentioned in a believing manner in our village. We had a couple living next door to us for five years, upper-middle-class, Pentecostal, fundamentalist Roman Catholics, yes, Ebb & Flo Turbid. As they didn't attend the village church I didn't count them: they went to a house-church in the next county. We went to supper with them one evening along with our friends, with whom we agreed not to bring up any religious topic.

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In spite of that, Flo worked it round to her plan of treating us to a video of their good works. There was a slightly fuzzy scene of a preacher in full-flow in a barn somewhere. Suddenly Ebb froze the frame and Flo said, 'Look, do you see that white mark over his head?' We all saw a blurr. 'That's a guardian angel,' she said. We all leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Then my wife in wonderful, knowing innocence said, 'Does that mean if we see a photo of someone with red eyes they have the devil in them?' Brilliant! She had punctured the moment; frozen looks from guess-who but Ebb rolled the video to the end anyway with a host of fuzzy angels! That was, of course, the last supper. No rising tide round our way.

Councillor Mary Lloyd

Congratulations to former SOF vice-Chair Mary Lloyd on her recent election to serve on Southampton City Council.

What about ‘over the pond’? Isn’t America still experiencing a rising tide of evangelicalism with political clout? How did that begin? Robert Middlekauff, in *The Glorious Cause*, about the American Revolution, says colonial religious influence was a ‘reformed Protestantism with a genuine Puritan involvement’ written into their earliest political documents. He says that the early Continental Congress was resolved to ‘encourage frugality, economy, and industry’, and to ‘discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation’. He adds that these Puritan standards were another weapon against tyrannical government by reminding Americans that ‘their virtue underlay their political freedom’ and they seamlessly stitched in the only words Americans had, words born of Protestantism: a literal but not a Machiavellian mix of religion and politics.

Then on 4th July 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote, in the first two sentences of the *Declaration of the Thirteen States*: ‘Nature and Nature’s God’, and ‘all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights’ and in the last two sentences an appeal to ‘the Supreme Judge of the world’ and ‘divine Providence’. Don’t they say that God is written into their political structure? It’s an argument used by the current religious Right, but they’re wrong. The Declaration of Independence is *not* the law of their land: it was a brief statement sent from the colonists to King George III.

The *legal* foundation of the US is the Constitution of the United States, penned in 1789. It makes *no* mention of God at all. The First Amendment says, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...’ Jefferson called this a ‘wall of separation between church and state’, a wall which is maintained by the US Supreme Court today.

Then when Popes Pius IX and X wheeled out their encyclicals during the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and the classical atheists built their boats, the evangelicals re-floated their Fundamentals: 90 essays in 12 volumes. *Fundamentalism* followed. By 1925, William Jennings Bryan, ex-Secretary of State, prosecuting the biology teacher John Scopes, upheld the six-day creation. 90 years on, the latest cunning plan is to push ‘Intelligent Design’ into High School science.

My experience of American schools is over 50 years old but it scratched two benchmarks for me during three teen years in Bethesda, MD, just outside Washington DC. During my first 18 months I saw no religion there at all: no church buildings, except Washington Cathedral, which even then was a tourist trap, and, of course, no RS and no assemblies in High School. Even Ebb & Flo were not in sight but there was the *Pledge of Allegiance*, from 1892. Every morning, the whole class stood and turned to the US flag draped in the corner of every room: ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the

republic for which it stands, one nation, under God...’ ‘Under God’, that phrase, inserted in 1954, was the only mention of God I heard as a young teen in 1958/9, a more powerful ritual than any religious recitation I have ever heard.

Then in the following 18 months the tide rolled in. On a summer day, I had a vision of Mary – the lovely, bronzed, 15-year-old Mary from next door who, it turned out, was part of a dynamic youth group at a church in Washington. You can read more about Mary, me and Christianity in *This Life on Earth*, the anthology recently published by SOF. What it doesn’t contain is my visit to Billy Graham’s crusade in the Phillies’ baseball stadium, Pennsylvania. I saw a mighty throng, I heard an angel choir and methought, ‘My God ... how great thou art.’ There *was* a tide of faith. I saw BG at Earls Court some years later. Cliff Richard sang, *My God*, badly.

In the 1960’s the tide of the religious Right rose: on both sides of the pond. In 1965, Mary Whitehouse began the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association, aiming at the media. In 1970, Mrs W and her ‘flimsy organisation’, as *The Times* called it, linked hands with Malcolm Muggeridge, Cliff Richard and, yes, Ebb & Flo, to launch *The Festival of Light*. The chief aim was to hold back the tide of sewage in the media: sex, bad language and violence, in that order.

In 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in the USA targeting single issues like abortion. 1979 was also the year that Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran and Margaret Thatcher in Britain but I can’t find any direct links except between Mrs Whitehouse and Mrs Thatcher. Mrs W found an ally in the Conservative government, especially Mrs T herself. Mrs Whitehouse was duly appointed CBE a year later in 1980. The two women’s influence can be found in the Indecent Displays Act, 1981, and the Video [Nasties] Recordings Act of 1984. But in the 1980s such influences ebbed in Britain.

In America, evangelicals and fundamentalists swung to Ronald Reagan but in 2000, George W. was not a shoo-in, in spite of his evangelical claims but a few holey chads helped him. It was the Twin Towers attack that established him. Within hours of that attack, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said that it was the deserved punishment of God on a corrupt United States: ‘the pagans, the abortionists, the feminists, the gays, the lesbians.’ *And they were believed*, although the attack was known to be by nineteen al Qaeda terrorists, motivated by violent Muslim jihad with the long view of enforcing Muslim Sharia Law. It was enough for Bush to enforce violent *Christian* jihad.

The Christian Right sees the government’s role in society as ‘cultivating virtue’, echoing the colonies of 230 years before, but now fully aware of promoting a literal interpretation of the bible as the basis for moral values to be enforced by political legislation: *Christian* Sharia law. Do you remember the Purity Code, the

commitment Jim Burns asked Christian teenagers to make ‘to themselves, their families and their future spouses?’ Many reportedly signed up. Do you remember that TV documentary interviewing six teenagers after a few months of the Purity Code? It was like listening to six adolescent Bill Clintons, ‘I did not have sexual relations with that woman.’ Everything but! We’ve all observed the Taliban rule as in, say, Afghanistan, with images of restricted women, oppressed by men supposedly derived from their religion. The American Religious Right wants a similar patriarchal regime in the home and nation derived from their religion. They really don’t see the irony.

It was sometime in this era that Tony Blair was asked how much his belief in God influenced his policies when Alistair Campbell leapt in saying, ‘We don’t do God.’ That was either an instinctive protection of the PM or was it a very careful separation from the American tidal flow enjoyed by George W?

Naturally, I have fond memories of America so I watch it with interest. A month ago I read that Sgt Justin Griffith at Fort Bragg, NC, is spearheading an atheist group in the US Army, an army that takes religion very seriously. Sgt Griffith is organising a *Rock Beyond Belief* event with Richard Dawkins, to counter Billy Graham’s *Rock the Fort* event of two years ago. As for the new atheists, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris are American and they influence the intelligentsia, but, with Dawkins and Hitchens, they just react to fundamentalists. The two squads are camped on opposite shores and they just shout from the shallows.

There are more subtle signs. Don Cupitt in one of his books pointed out the tides in modern funeral services: the ebbing of eschatology – less ‘death, judgement, heaven and hell’ – and the flowing of kind eulogies about the deceased. Even Joe Carter, pastor of New Hope Baptist church, called the four-hour gig for Whitney Houston a ‘home-coming’ not a ‘heaven-sending’. Then there are floods of flowers, cards and gifts taken to the sites of accidents or other deaths rather than to conventional places of worship.

George Carey’s remark that the church does not ‘own marriage’ enabled Equalities Minister, Lynn

Featherstone, to put a second spin on it to bring marriage into a more democratic arena. The church should pay heed. Don has also highlighted humanitarianism: perhaps we could add the global Occupy movement, praised by Jimmy Carter a few weeks ago?

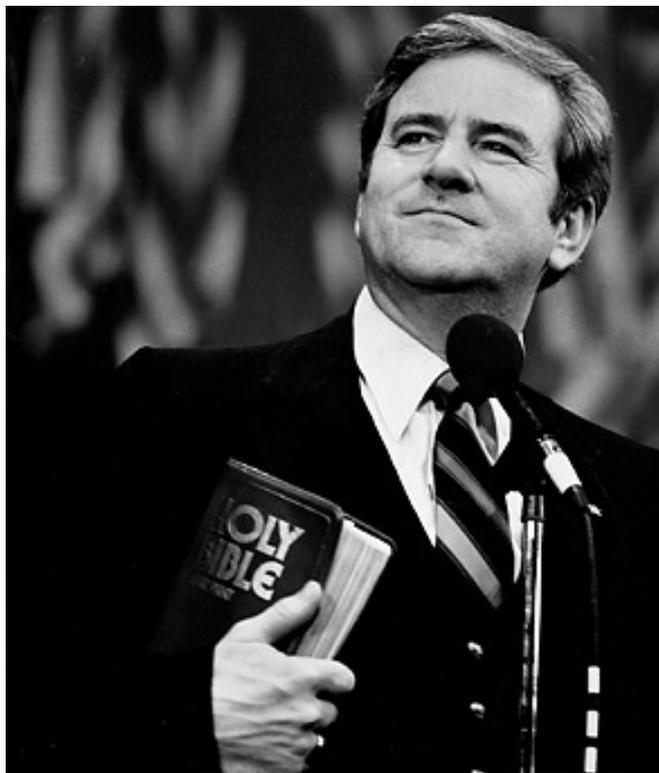
I also have a few personal musings after 26 years of heading up RS and Philosophy at a large, independent school. Presented with detachment and care, intelligent students *will* learn about religion. I ensured that RS

was in the core of subjects taken by all our students and, with careful syllabus choice at GCSE, they readily took to introductory philosophy and ethics. If RS comes into the English Baccalaureate in this way it seems fine to me.

Following the completion of Coursework – arguments about God, abortion etc – the students would freely write, or report, that the study had made them explore such topics more carefully. Many had changed their minds on the issues and nearly every boy and girl gained an A or A* in RS. A healthy handful went on to read Philosophy at A-level and university – all summarised for me,

most poignantly, by the Head Master’s very bright daughter, then in the Sixth Form. She was outside my office door on my final day in 2005. She was literally the last person I spoke to as I left the School. She gave me a card and said thank you for ‘teaching me to think’. What more could a teacher ask? but I know those memories are mere drops in the ocean.

Where does this leave the ark of the Sea of Faith: rising or sinking? My impression from the students I taught, the neighbours I speak with, the media I attend to and the books I read, is that most people are surfing in the sea of faith anyway but they don’t know there’s a network they can join. As for direction, Ebb & Flo have had their day. We’re all Beach Boys now, so, as for compass heading: ‘God only knows...’



Jerry Falwell ‘God’s Right Hand’

Richard Hall, a former Curate of Holy Trinity, Eastbourne, became Head of Religion and Philosophy at King Edward VI School, Southampton until he retired in in 2005.