

## EDITORIAL

One of the most remarkable stories of the twentieth century is the story of how Bill Clinton rose to hold the most powerful political office in the world. He is the boy next door made good. His story is an embodiment of the cliché that all too often is the American dream. His natural talent overcame considerable personal adversities to triumph in a world in which privilege and patronage are the normal routes to power. Of course his life is not a Hollywood film and he enjoyed good fortune, made terrible mistakes and didn't fulfil all his early potential. But his life is a great story.

He is not, however, as I discovered over the summer, a great writer. His autobiography is overlong and at times swamped by mind-numbing detail. It was regularly reported during his Presidency that Clinton had a superb grasp of policy detail. He was also able to synthesize a number of conflicting perspectives and produce the famous 'third way'. These skills come through clearly in the book. Clinton is desperate to present the minutiae of his decisions and achievements. The early setbacks of health-care reform, the disastrous 1994 Congressional elections and subsequent budget battles meant he was forced into a gradual piecemeal approach to social and economic reform. The sum total of his policy initiatives was often highly impressive, as the economic successes demonstrate most clearly, but the detailed description of their implementation does not make for thrilling reading.

Of course one reason Clinton is desperate to be remembered for his political achievements is that most people think first of his personal failings. The Monica Lewinsky affair is dealt with succinctly and with a degree of humility. We learn little that we didn't know already. What is interesting about the actual affair is the psychotherapeutic framework with which Clinton surrounds his analysis of his behaviour. This receives far more attention than the actual physical technicalities, thankfully. He confesses early on that his difficult childhood, the problem of living with an abusive, alcoholic stepfather, led him to develop 'parallel lives'. He could be cheerful, charming and seemingly successful while also enduring great fear about what was happening at home. One was not necessarily a lie; both were who he was. And of course these twin skills meant he could be the phenomenal politician he was, able to absorb the policy discussions and genuinely sympathize with the pain people suffered. After the revelation of the affair, Clinton mentions the counselling

he and Hillary undertook as well as the pastoral support he received from clergy. The aim of the counselling was to unite the parallel lives. Clinton is widely regarded as the first of the baby boomer generation to reach high political office. One can't help thinking that previous generations would not have engaged in such psychotherapeutic analysis or speak. But then, and this is perhaps the lasting impression of the whole discussion, such matters used to be regarded as personal and private with little bearing on performance in public office.

Alongside the psychotherapeutic analysis is the political analysis. Like Hillary in her autobiography and Sidney Blumenthal in *Clinton Wars*, Clinton believes he was a victim of a right-wing neo-conservative conspiracy to smear his Presidency. There was a group of Republicans who could never admit that his Presidency was legitimate. They were determined to find any scandal possible and if they couldn't find anything then they were going to invent accusations. The media were willing to participate in this process, accepting unsubstantiated rumour as fact and failing to print any findings that proved Clinton innocent. A number of broadsheets and TV networks cooperated with Republican politicians and wealthy backers to promote the image of a scandal-ridden President. The focus of attention was Whitewater. Clinton admits the error he made was to agree that a special prosecutor should be appointed to investigate his role in the failed business. Once this person was in post they had unlimited, unaccountable power. Kenneth Starr infamously exploited this to pursue first those from Arkansas who could incriminate the President and then, when this failed, those who could cast aspersions on Clinton's sexual activity, eventually with Lewinsky. Clinton's argument is that he was wrong to have an inappropriate relationship with Lewinsky, but that spending all the time and money on a special prosecutor to discover this was an enormous waste. Furthermore the smearing and rumour-spreading that went for reporting only demonstrated the extent of the neo-conservative conspiracy against him. Clinton is not the only victim of these attacks – as the 2000 election approached Al Gore was equally targeted, in his case for campaign finance irregularities. The ultimate triumph of the neo-conservatives was to steal the election from Gore through the offices of the Supreme Court.

It is far beyond the scope of this editorial to analyse the veracity of Clinton's claims, although clearly there is a certain sympathy with his analysis or else his views would not have been repeated. The best argument for the conspiracy comes from Blumenthal's book which is incredibly detailed and specific. Certainly we would welcome articles that discuss this topic. Rather what is interesting for us here now is the analysis that politics has become a cultural rather than economic affair. Politics in the future, according to Clinton, is a battle between conservatives and liberals. The totems of this battle are the well-known issues of gay and lesbian relationships, abortion, gun ownership,

school prayers, social security provision and international relations. People do not make individual decisions about each of these issues, weighing up the pros and cons of abortion before moving on to America's role in the world community. Instead they buy into the package; they become liberals or conservatives and therefore committed to increased welfare provision, limits on gun ownership and gay and lesbian state-endorsed marriage or the opposite. Furthermore, if you can pigeonhole an individual on any one of these issues then you will tend to know where they stand on the others. Conservatism or liberalism is a cultural package; the values and principles that underpin them lead inevitably to the whole range of stances on issues. Clinton was identified, quite correctly, as a liberal and so became the target for concerted right-wing neo-conservative attacks. Likewise, George W. Bush is the butt of much liberal despair and criticism.

The predominance of cultural identity in politics is at the expense of ideological identity based around economic theory. Cultural politics has replaced the economic clashes of capitalism and Marxism. This is not to say there are not economic consequences of cultural choices but that the economics are secondary to the culture. A factory worker may end up voting for tax cuts for their boss and limitations on union power because they make a political choice based on gun control laws or state marriage for gay and lesbian people. Furthermore, as Tony Blair's Labour Party discovered, voters are more likely to trust you with economic policy if they agree with your cultural and social values.

The question is, what as theologians are we to make of Clinton's analysis of political life? To what extent is Clinton describing something beyond his own personal experience? How can theologians comment on this analysis if it is correct?

There will be those of course who will not accept the demise of economic theory as an arbitrator of political choices. For them, Clinton was more of a capitalist than a liberal and any attempt to reframe the political landscape is an old capitalist trick. Such people are increasingly in a minority, however, and they lack serious influence in mainstream political life. Furthermore they need to be able to explain why those who significantly suffer from Republican economic policies still vote for them. This needs to be more detailed than tired statements about false consciousness.

More credence can be given to the notion that what Clinton describes is the extremes. There are some who fall purely into the neo-conservative or liberal camps but a majority will be somewhere along a spectrum between the two. Individuals might well favour more restrictive gun laws while feeling uncomfortable with state-sanctioned gay and lesbian marriages. This leads to the more substantial criticism that what Clinton analyses is more true of the US than of Western Europe. The neo-conservative cultural and social agenda has

not, at least yet, found substantial support in Western European political parties. There are some hints that politicians want to distance themselves from liberalism; Tony Blair recently criticized some of the social changes that occurred in the 1960s, but this is an attempt to keep control of the middle ground. Neo-conservatism as a powerful political force remains a US phenomenon with little in Western Europe to match the religious right.

In fact the major political issue in Western Europe at the moment is the war on terror and its actual manifestation as the occupation of Iraq. This leads to another question about Clinton's analysis, namely that as well as the clash between liberalism and neo-conservatism we also see a clash between different types of neo-conservatism. The war in Iraq is between religious cultural forces, including of course the Americans. In Iraq the Bush administration claims for itself a liberal role, promoting Western democracy and human rights. It is not very successful at the moment but this does not alter the rhetoric of this atypical conservative internationalism. Further adding to the confusion of identities is the democratic values of significant Islamic groups in Iraq. This does not mean the situation cannot be described in cultural political terms but that the boundaries between liberal and conservative and religious and secular are not very clear to the point where the descriptors themselves seem flawed.

So there are questions to be asked about Clinton's analysis. That said, he presents themes in contemporary politics which develop our understanding of the political process. What can theologians say about all this? At the moment our role seems highly restricted. The social and cultural values that underpin different identity groups are exceptionally powerful. Part of their power comes from the religious sanction they each can draw on. Clinton reflects upon his Christian faith as much as any of his right-wing, moral majority critics. Theology seems unable to arbitrate between the two groups; the churches cannot decide whether the liberals or the neo-conservatives are right. This does not mean there are no Christians of conviction among liberals or conservatives, but rather that their theology cannot convince those who supposedly share their faith to change their mind. At the moment in the 'Clinton Wars' there is no peacemaking role for theology. In the meantime therefore theologians can either take sides, with differing levels of participation, or seek an analytical high ground where they explain each side to themselves. This explanatory role lacks power or political prestige. It recognizes the real power of cultural identity. But it chips away at the intellectual hegemony of groups at a time when their claims, bolstered by religious sanction, are in danger of generating extremes and violence. Neither side will welcome this theological role, nor will theologians feel at home in cultural groups, but it is important if Clinton's wars are not to become all our wars.

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