

'Belief' Transcript: BBC RadioTony Blair Interview**Q = Question****A = Answer**

Q My guest here to discuss his beliefs is the man who was the country's longest-serving Labour Prime Minister ever, winning three consecutive General Elections. Tony Blair entered Parliament at the age of thirty, was elected Leader of the Labour Party in 1994 and immediately began reforming it, dropping Clause Four – Old Labour's historic commitment to nationalisation – and creating New Labour, a focused and purposeful entity that he would lead to sweeping victory in 1997. Within twelve months, he'd negotiated the Good Friday Agreement – a power-sharing solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Married to Cherie Booth, a committed Catholic, Tony Blair and their children regularly attended Catholic Mass, though throughout more than thirteen years in the public eye, he kept his religious beliefs private. As his loyal press secretary, Alistair Campbell put it 'We don't do God.' But in fact, Tony Blair was always a man of strong Christian convictions, seeking strength in his faith for decisions to go to war. More wars in fact, than any other Prime Minister since World War Two.

Since stepping down from office in June 2007, he's converted to Catholicism, become Peace Envoy to the Middle East, and founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, committed to bringing different religions together as a force for good in the world.

Tony Blair, religions have often been the cause of dissent. I mention the Balkans, Sri Lanka, India – wherever you look, religions have divided people very often. I wonder how hopeful you are of success?

A Well it's certainly a big challenge. I mean religion's often seen by people as a source of conflict and division, but religious faith is also about compassion and social justice, and solidarity and...there are many people of religious faith who do great work in the world. So I guess like most things, it's got a positive and a negative aspect.

Q Mmm, the good deeds are part of every religion aren't they?

Doing good in the world.

A I think they are. I mean you've gotta be careful of mis-stepping on some piece of theology here, but actually if you look at most of the main religions, they have as a central tenet sometimes *the* central, guiding belief of the religion, that you should love your neighbour as yourself. So in that sense I think good deeds are very much associated with religious faith. So you do have all this em sectarianism also associated with it, but the purpose in a way of the, the Faith Foundation is to try to promote the good and drive out the bad.

Q The good deeds unite religions, so it's very often the detail of the theology that divides them.

A Yes, or that can be linked then to certain political, cultural, social issues, and then religion in a sense becomes a means of self-identity as against the other person. Religious faith in my view usually has one of three meanings for people. It can either be very much a badge of self-identity - 'This defines what I am' – that can often be in quite an exclusive way, and it defines what I am as opposed to you. Religious faith can also be an interesting part of our tradition and history - it can help explain the type of people we are as a country, for example. Or thirdly it can be a source of inspiration for values and the way you lead your life. And it's that third part that I am most interested in.

Q Well take us on a spiritual journey then, throughout your life. I mean you were born in Edinburgh, your father was a barrister, chairman of the local Tory party, and an atheist. He was an atheist – how did that express itself in the family?

A My Dad was – well I say 'was' – is a...kind of militant atheist actually. Positively against religion, and it was part of our conversation in the family. My mother actually occasionally went to church, was not very active, but quite active – but more or less because it was a sort of social obligation in the type of village we lived in. Although I think she was quite, in her own way, quite religious. But her family were very strongly

Protestant. My er grandfather not that I met him, but on my mother's side had actually been a, I think had been a Grand Master of an Orange Lodge. And my grandmother, who had Alzheimer's, but one of the last really coherent comments she made to me was 'Whatever else you do, don't marry a Catholic, son!' So y'know, which er, so...

Q So we've got quite a lot of dissent within this Blair family, haven't we?

A Yes so I, I have, I have plenty of er experience, both of the, the family side that was anti-religious and that that was actually pretty bigoted.

Q When you were at School, you had news that your father had had a heart attack, and that you said was your first spiritual experience. Can you describe it?

A I was ten years old at the time. In the early hours of the morning, he'd suffered a serious stroke. So he was then rushed into hospital, and then I remember the next day my mother waking us up 'cos there was obviously something very wrong in the family. And ...but she'd decided, because she wanted to keep some sense of normality, that I should still go to school. So, I did and I, I remember actually praying with the headmaster of the school. I said to him that em 'Before we pray, I should tell you that my father, he doesn't believe in God.' And I always remember the headmaster saying to me 'Well that doesn't matter, because God believes in him.' And that was a sort of, it was just one of these very er beautiful moments, but, obviously I was in a great state of emotion, and then at the end of the day my father was clear he was gonna live. That even though he was er...

Q And did...

A ..very ill.

Q And, and did you think the prayer had counted?

A I don't, I don't know really. But what I know is it made a – as, as it would, on a ten year old child – made a tremendous impact on me.

Q The ten year old believed that the prayer had been effective.

A The ten year old I think did, yes. But I think it was also the fact that there was an enormous sense of comfort even though, because you know, even at ten years old, you're not foolish enough to know that sometimes you pray for people and they still die. But that's, in a sense you've got to try and accept that as God's will too.

Q Now you went to Oxford and unlike many students who really often ignore religion entirely in their student years, you became involved very much. I know that your mother died while you were at Oxford, and I wonder if the grief over your loss prevailed you in that direction.

A No actually I, I'd become, interested in religion before that, and I got interested in religion and politics at the same time. I really, I got interested, bizarrely because of er two Australians, a Ugandan and an Indian, which is (laughs) a very peculiar em group of people ...to become influenced er whilst you're a student at Oxford. But...

Q This was your circle of friends, was it?

A I had sort of two circles of friends actually. I mean one circle of friends were, what I would say were more, the more party-going types. Part of the sort of Rock n Roll part of the life at university, and these were the others - not that they didn't like to party and Rock n Roll, incidentally. But they got me involved both in politics and in religion and the two came very much together. One of the Australians was a, an Anglican vicar ...

Q This is Peter Thompson.

A Yeah, Peter Thompson, y'know he just gave me a completely different insight into what religion could be about. And that came very much at the same time when I started to question some of the political beliefs, I'd been brought up with. And started to examine the impact of social conditions and how people develop. You know, the way you do at university. Suddenly you, your, your mind is opened up, your, your horizons expand, you're, you're subject to new ideas and new influences. And these were particularly intelligent and interesting people.

Q Now this was a sort of Christian Socialism that they offered.

A Yes Peter very much, yes.

Q And what did you mean by that?

A It, it had two meanings for me. I mean the first was that you had a duty to go out and work for other people, to care for other people. So the sort of more self-centred – I, I don't mean that in a...nasty way - but a more sort of self-centred existence than the sense I'd been taught that you have. Suddenly I became aware, 'No, actually people are set in a society, in a community and, and actually how they look after each other has an impact on how they develop. So there was a whole set of those sentiments that, that came with an opening of my, my mind. But also for Peter Thompson, he was very much focused on the notion of Christianity as living action in fellowship with others, rather than a private route of communication to...

Q And...

A ...a private and personal God.

Q And did that involve socialism? Egalitarianism?

A Yes, very much so and a form of communitarianism actually and...John McMurray and others who we read at the time, who were very much interested, and some of the more radical theologians who were very much interested in exploring what we meant by the divinity of Christ, what true religious faiths should compel you to do, what the relationship was actually. And this is the first time I became interested in the concept of inter-faith. What was the relationship between my own faith and those people of a different faith? What were the common roots? What was the common space that people of different faiths could inhabit? Y'know is there only one, true path to salvation, or are there many?

Q And you were confirmed when you were twenty, and you were confirmed in the Anglican faith, and that was the faith you embraced. So this is God's unique intervention in human destiny, incarnated in His son as a man who is crucified, and the bodily resurrection is your salvation. Is that what you believe?

A All of that is, part of our beliefs yes.

Q And was it difficult getting there? Did you find it a haven?

A No. It wasn't difficult getting there once I realised that the important thing was what instruction for my own life I drew from that. So in other words what was important to me was, then the sense of mission that gave me as to what I was going to do with my own life and how I was gonna interact with the world around me.

Q You didn't ever consider being ordained?

A No I didn't, or not really seriously in the sense that I actually had become very interested in politics then - I mean I hadn't, up until that time been interested in politics at all. You know if you'd talked to me aged nineteen I would've said to you, I would've, I think I would've run from the room screaming if I'd thought I would end up as a politician. But on the other hand, from that moment on I think I had in my own mind very much that what I would do with my life would be to try to have a purpose that was in some sense governed by, by the will of God. I mean that's...if you believe in it, that's what you believe.

Q And you came to London to be a barrister...

A Mm-hm

Q ...with a barrister interested in politics. You met Cherie who was a Catholic. Now that was very interesting, because you obviously fell in love and you were married at a Protestant church. But were you interested in her Catholicism at that time?

A I was interested in her Christianity. But I should say one thing 'cos it's, y'know I might as well be frank about this. You know afterwards when we started to think about how our children would be brought up and also because in the constituency there was a very strong Catholic tradition. So we went to a Catholic Church, going to Mass became what we did. Our kids were then brought up as Catholics. But I never, after I left office, converted to Catholicism, I mean I never did it in sort of disrespect of the Anglican Church or y'know because I felt some, some point of doctrine from which I had to depart from in some way.

Q No but in moving towards Catholicism, what was it that was pulling you towards it?

A Y'know I think I find that quite hard to answer. But I just felt, I felt at home in the Catholic Church and then as I say, I've been there for a long time em...

Q Mm

A ...so I'd been attending Mass for twenty, twenty-five years by the time I, I actually joined the Catholic Church.

Q There was a point at which you were, I think you took Communion at the Catholic Church and were asked by Basil Hume not to do that, because the Catholic Church had tightened its ruling. Were you yearning to take the Eucharist, particularly strongly?

A Well I wanted to take Communion when I was in Church...

Q Yeah...

A ...with other people, 'cos I think that's the natural thing to do. And the whole point about the breaking of the bread is, that you do it in communion with others and that's, that it's about. So even though I strictly shouldn't have, I used to take Communion. And then I think there was some larger event in the little Catholic Church in Islington that we used to go to. There was a, a kinda larger event, someone told a newspaper. And then it was in the newspaper, and then Basil I think felt he had to do something about it, although he was very sweet about it and very nice.

Q You became Leader of the party, swept to victory - huge waves of enthusiasm – and within a year you've tackled the Northern Ireland problem. Now Northern Ireland was a province riven by religious differences. What made you think you could resolve that?

A There were two motivations. First of all, I felt the times had changed, and in particular the relationship between Britain and the Republic of Ireland was completely different. And really y'know as we were, we were approaching the twenty-first century, was this not a very old-fashioned, and really absurd dispute to have in this day and age? So it was that motivation which maybe was a little arrogant of me. But I, I thought that, that really it should be possible to resolve it. I also, in a

personal level because my family on my mother's side had been from Ireland – actually Protestant but from the South of Ireland. So I had a very...strong connection with Ireland. We used to go there every year until the troubles began.

Q So did you share this with the protagonists in Northern Ireland? I mean did you say 'Look, my, I've got Orange connections on one side of my family and em, I'm married to a Catholic'? I mean surely if this could...

A Well they, they kind of all knew actually, 'cos every so often some guy who, who would say he was a cousin of mine would sort of wander up and (laughs) and say er y'know 'You don't know me, but we're related,' type of thing. So no I think everyone knew that I had the, this, this very Protestant line on my mother's side and then obviously it was open that Cherie had, she was a Catholic. Indeed, I think she, I've got a feeling she was vigorously criticised before the 1997 election on the basis that I was unsuitable since my wife would owe her allegiance to Rome rather than (laughs) rather than the United Kingdom. But er...

Q I wonder, given the struggle and the enormous divisions – almost tribal divisions – that existed at one time in Northern Ireland, why in domestic policy did you introduce faith schools which separated children on religious lines?

A Well I didn't introduce faith schools.

Q Extended them.

A Yeah. What I really did was say 'You can't say to Christians and to Jews that you can, you can have a faith school, but Muslims can't.' So er we actually introduced those schools for Muslims as well. I, I find this a really difficult question, but here's what I think on balance. I think what faith schools did – 'cos my children went to faith schools - my youngest still does go to, to a faith school. I think they can help give a sense of, of values, they can ground a child, they can instil a certain amount of discipline, in the right way, in a child's mind, provided that they approach religion in a non-sectarian way. And I mean that's why it's important,

they're part of the National Curriculum and so on and y'know, I know there are examples maybe of schools that, faith schools that don't do that. But actually faith schools, we were, sent our children to and the faith schools I've got experience of, visiting many of them over the years, is that on the whole they do try to teach children...

Q I'm sure they do try. But given the subsequent history of em y'know Islam in this country, the idea of separating Islamic children in one school and Christian children in another seems to have an impulse that is going against the grain of perhaps what the faith foundation wants.

A I know and that's a perfectly good point. The only thing I feel is that, I think people often do want to choose to educate their children within their faith. I think there are two different ways of doing it. And I also think you can get a de facto one faith school where you're not actually open about the fact that it is and then that can actually be very damaging because that comes outside of the rules that apply to faith schools that operate inside the state section. ...

Q But nonetheless they are ideologically different aren't they? They're going to be divisive.

A It depends how they are. I think of my own children. I would say that they are not at all of that attitude. I think it really does depend what's taught in a faith school.

Q but we know of Madrassars in Pakistan where there is absolute hostility to Christianity is instilled?

A Correct and I think that's why I say you obviously can get schools that are religious in nature, that are religious and divisive. But I would say, you can get the, the other too. Y'know, what I think is important about faith schools is that they do teach respect for and tolerance of those of different faiths, and also a little bit hopefully about the history of the way different faiths have evolved. So I think it's a difficult question. But if I was to speak as a parent and not as a politician, I think certainly within the state sector I've found that those faith schools did, give something to the child that, I'm not saying can't be done in a non faith

school, 'cos obviously it can. But is particularly associated maybe, with a faith school in its broader sense. Now obviously if they're being taught some very narrow religious point in opposition to others that's bad, but I think most of the faith schools in our state section do not operate like that. Now, the problem in relation to Islam was very, very simple, which is not unreasonably Muslims said 'Your kids if they're Christian can, can be in a faith school, if they're Jewish they can be in a faith school. But they can't if they're, they're Muslim.

Q As your government rolled forward, your domestic policies more or less commanded consensus - education, the Health Service and so on. It was your foreign policy that was going to divide the country. You didn't know what was going to come, of course, but by 1999 you had been involved in the first of your wars in a sense - Kosovo, Sierra Leone. And in Chicago you made the definition of the Chicago Doctrine, in which you outlined the idea of military intervention from humanitarian motives. That shifted the whole world perspective on how we might go to war. Do you have a religious justification for that?

A No, not in any direct sense, no. I think you, you can feel that humanitarian impulse whether you're religious or not. And...y'know I had decided at that time – I mean Kosovo was the major military action, although we had actually taken by then - myself and President Clinton - action in respect of Iraq em in December 1998. But in Kosovo, we, I thought we had a classic example of the non-interventionist policy that preceded the interventionist policy. The non-interventionist policy was in, in Bosnia in the early 1990s. Hundreds of thousands of people died, and I was very determined that shouldn't happen again. But it's a really tricky area this, and I don't neither from a religious or a non-religious perspective do I shrink from the, the difficulties. And some people would say 'Look – that's just crazy. You, you, y'know you've gotta operate your foreign policy on the basis of your nation's self-interest and y'know you cannot go off on a y'know, a moral mission of this nature.' But my view is that in the world in which we live today, which is interdependent and

interconnected, in fact an enlightened view of self-interest impels us towards humanitarian intervention...

Q But there is...

A ...if necessary.

Q There is a Christian definition of the 'just war', which means that the war must be legal and agreed to be. That it must be a just cause, but also that the evil it unleashes must be in proportion to that, that it's trying to avoid. Now Iraq must have presumably surprised you by the degree to which what was unleashed when that war began exceeded anyone's expectation in terms of the consequences. Do you have regrets about it?

A Obviously I regret the fact that those consequences happened. But I don't regret the decision to remove Saddam. I mean I think what is important when you talk about the 'consequences that are unleashed' is to ask 'How?' And 'Why?' they are unleashed. My view – and even more so clearly now actually than, than then, spending a lot of time out in the region, is that the reason why it became really difficult in Iraq was not because the people there wanted it to be difficult. On the contrary, I think they would've been very happy they'd got rid of the dictatorship that was appalling and oppressive and resulted in many, many people dying and a country retarded in its growth. They would've been happy to see it develop with international support. But you got basically outside interference linking up with internal extremism - Iran on the one side, Al Qaida on the other.

Q Many, many people who you have a high regard for – the Archbishop of Canterbury or Cormack Murphy O'Connor the Cardinal, or even the Pope at that time – pleaded the case for not going to war in Iraq. You disregarded them. I wonder if you feel now you might have listened? Because you seem to feel that your Christian conviction was more right than theirs.

A No I wouldn't put it like that. I mean first of all I didn't disregard them and I didn't not listen to them. But in the end I had to decide. I

certainly don't believe that there is a Christian conviction that is superior one way or another on what the right thing to do is.

Q But you did believe you were right and they were not.

A Well if I hadn't believed I was right I wouldn't have done it, so...

Q But where did that conviction come from?

A Em...it came from my view that in the end, it was important to remove Saddam from Iraq. Actually the first action we'd taken was in December 1998, I mean it's a long, long history. And there are two views even out in the region today about this, incidentally. Y'know, some people say 'Well if you had Iraq there under Saddam, then you'd have a brake on Iran.' Which is a perfectly valid argument, except I say to people 'Yeah but that was our policy back in the '80s when we were actually supporting Saddam.' And the result was the Iran-Iraq war and a million casualties and then the invasion of Kuwait – and then all the history following it. I think these decisions are y'know, the most difficult you ever take, and you cannot and should not take them incidentally because you believe that you have some religious conviction that's superior to anyone else. And that's...absolutely clear. But the trouble with them is, in the end, that the consequences of action are serious – and they were serious – but the consequences of inaction would also have been serious in my view. So...

Q One of the consequences of your action held by many to be the alienating of the Islamic world and the feeding of terror – the recruitment of terrorists. Do you accept that now?

A No. I mean this is where I come back very strongly on this one. When those people drive car bombs into a market in Baghdad and kill a whole lot of other Muslims, how have we provoked them to do that?

Q Well there was certainly a huge worldwide outcry from Islamic nations and from Islamic individuals of resentment against the West for invading Islamic countries. That was clearly felt by a great many people.

A I totally agree it was 'felt' – but sometimes you've actually gotta challenge the feeling. If you get rid of the Taliban in Afghanistan and

then you say 'Right what we're gonna do is, we're gonna give you a United Nations process for electing your President, and then we're gonna give you twenty billion dollars' worth of aid and as much international help as you want.' Now the people from those groups that back the Taliban that then go in and plant a car bomb – how are we provoking them to do that? That's what has to be challenged, and actually one of the reasons why we will not defeat this, in my view, until we start challenging this position within Islam and outside of Islam, is because there is no reason why they should do that.

Q But how can you challenge Islam, being the person as it were responsible for leading this country into war against...

A Well I don't think it's...

Q ...Islamic countries?

A ...me particularly that challenges them. I mean, I mean I do y'know if, if I'm confronted by this argument, (laughing) I come back as I just have. Em, but I think there are also other people within Islam who will do this. And I think there is an increasing view, actually, amongst many of what I would call the modern minded, moderate and sensible people within Islam who understand that however much people might want to do it, when they go and say, "George Bush has made me go and plant this car bomb in Baghdad" and blow up a whole lot of innocent Muslims, we've got to stand up and say "that is nonsense. You're doing it and you're responsible for it and it's wrong". If you actually wanted a better life for the people in that country, surely what you do is allow them to have their democracy rather than try and stop it.

Q Nonetheless, seven hundred thousand dead. Do you bear that on your conscience?

A I do not pass a single day in which I do not reflect on this and think of the responsibility. There's a huge dispute incidentally amongst, about the, the numbers of people that have died. But the important thing is to understand whether it's thirty thousand or three hundred thousand, y'know Saddam was removed in May 2003. What has happened since

then has been a fight against the selfsame forces that were actually fighting all over that region. And I'm afraid at some point we've got to be prepared to stand up and say 'This is, this is wrong.'

Q Do you see it as a clash of civilisations?

A No it's not a clash of civilisations actually, because I don't think the West wants this fight and I don't think the majority of people in, in Islam want it. I think it's a clash within a particular religious faith, and I think in the end actually their real motivation – which is why the majority of people they kill are, are Muslims, - they're not Christians.

Q You're on, you're on the record as saying that you believe that they are, engaged in a 'visceral struggle between good and evil.' That's a very apocalyptic statement. Do you believe that?

A I think actually these acts of terrorism are utterly evil yes, I do. And when you think of the numbers of wholly innocent people that have died, you see that's why I don't say the people with responsibility for the deaths are the people that remove the bad regime that everyone accepts as bad. I say the responsibility lies with the people doing the terrorism, 'cos there's no reason for them to do the terrorism.

Q Has your conversion, which offers confession and forgiveness been a comfort to you?

A My religious faith is a comfort to me all the time, yes. Not simply in those specific aspects but, in the end you...you accept there is a higher power than yourself and that is both something that should make you fearful, but something that also is a source of comfort.

Q Do all religions worship the same God?

A Now that's a very good question....mmm. I'd have to think about that and how to answer it really. I mean I think...one interesting question is - certainly for the Abrahamic faiths - there's so much common heritage in history. I actually read the Old Testament and the New Testament and the Koran virtually every, every day. And if you read the Koran what is fascinating is to see the Old Testament stories and indeed the Gospel stories – but retold in the Koran. Do we all worship the same God? Er

these are really difficult questions and I'm not sure that they're not em questions that are too difficult for me to, to answer. But I do believe that there is a common space that most religions congregate upon, whether that is the space that you define that is inhabited by their God I don't know. I think that's a difficult question. Let me put your question to myself in a different way – do I believe that a, a Muslim who lives a good life and does good things and is a model citizen, an example to others - do I believe that that person is capable of salvation? Yes. So does that mean we worship the same God? I, I don't know (chuckles).

Q Tony Blair, thank you.

A Thank you.

(End of interview)
