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THE EDUCATION OF DAVID MARTIN

The making of an unlikely sociologist

David Martin

SPCK

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To my parents, Frederick Martin and Rhoda Miriam Martin
and
For our grandchildren on the occasion of our fiftieth wedding anniversary, 30 June 2012

'This autobiography is not meant to be a precise intellectual history, which I doubt if anyone can write about himself, without fudging the facts. Ideas, even if they come from books, are modified by experience in ways too indirect to be assessed at the time, or recalled accurately afterwards.'

Clive James, *May Week Was In June: More Unreliable Memoirs*

'We do not content ourselves with the life we have in ourselves and in our own being; we desire to live an imaginary life in the minds of others, and for this purpose we endeavour to shine. We labour unceasingly to adorn and preserve this imaginary existence and neglect the real. And if we possess calmness, or generosity or truthfulness, we are eager to make it known, so as to attach these virtues to that imaginary existence.'

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

'Nature to be commanded must be obeyed. The imagination must be given not wings but weights.'

Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*

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Introduction: my education in prospect

In my eightieth year, 2009, I was working with my friend Otto Kallscheuer for the European Commission, and he asked me how I became a sociologist. I explained that in 1947 I had been refused university entrance to study English Literature and failed a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. I had spent 1952 to 1959 as a primary school teacher in West London and Somerset. I stumbled on sociology by accident when a colleague in the Somerset school showed me his correspondence course for an external London University degree. From 1956, when my first marriage broke up, to 1959, I followed that course in my spare time. To my astonishment I won the annual university scholarship in sociology and entered the university as a postgraduate. Between 1959 and 1971, as I moved from primary school teaching in SW14 to an LSE chair, I was besieged by neurasthenia and a chronic fear I was an interloper with no right of entry. The aftershocks never fully dissipated. Otto thought the story worth telling, though he can have had no idea of the travail of telling it or the re-examination of self it might require.

My religious, moral and intellectual education was an inchoate groping, shaped by apparent accidents and driven by the helpful problems of a revivalist childhood. I had to find a way out of fundamentalism without causing my father terrible pain. The story of my education can be regarded as an act of witness, a conversion narrative that begins with successive losses of faith and continues with unexpected recoveries. The losses and recoveries are social, political and religious, all tied together.

What Evangelicals believe about God will always affect what they believe about politics and society. I began by taking for granted the assumptions of my Evangelical childhood. I graduated in adolescence to a pacifist liberal socialism, until in mid-life I accepted an Augustinian realism about the glory and the wretchedness of the human condition. That final shift began in late adolescence when I read Pascal's *Pensées*. Sociology for me has been about the social incarnation

of religious and political visions of human betterment and their refraction and frustration by social realities. If my story makes sense it comes from that project.

Helpful problems of a revivalist childhood

My father was a chauffeur who in his early fifties became a taxi driver, and in his spare time preached in London's Hyde Park. He waited patiently for me to 'give my heart to Jesus'. If he had pressured me I could have rebelled. As it was, I found it impossible to explore the maddening maze of things without undermining what was most precious to him. Decency required dissimulation, and dissimulation was not recommended at home or in the New Testament. You don't hear sermons in the Christian pulpit about the virtues of hypocrisy, so I have had to preach and practise them myself. Our Christianity was upfront and did not provide advice for everyday dilemmas or rules of thumb for negotiating imperfect solutions. There was a gap where most families have proverbial wisdom for morally and practically just about getting by. My moral education swung between hell and heaven with few negotiated settlements. Catholics have casuistry to help them, but we didn't know we could do with a casuistry. Much later in academic life I fastened on the problem of sincerity in politics and the need for judicious hypocrisy for the sake of the greater good or simple charity.

Apart from tactics of avoidance and retirement into bemused apathy, I was equipped with two speeds: forgiveness and outrage, especially outrage over injustice. Though I was inclined to forgive and found it difficult to keep outrage going, my forgiveness could not be relied on. Once I had run out of forgiveness I floundered. Just as Christianity makes no provision for negotiated compromise, it lacks a code of honour specifying predictable responses to predators. That's fine if you are good at just saying 'No', but I had a knack of ignoring the click of the safety catch. Nobody warned me the gospel was hyperbolic about forgiving people up to 'seventy times seven'. When I dealt with estate agents I either allowed myself to be swindled or broke out in uncontrollable anger. In practice, of course, our family looked after its reputation as keenly as anybody else, because faith demanded we keep our noses clean. My parents had lived in a harsh school and knew what was required. My father was canny, and my mother practised a subversive line in sardonic comment. But I was a dreamy and unworldly romantic shielded by the goodness of my parents.

There was another difficulty. My father wanted me to do something useful and likely to guarantee a secure job, which meant (say) £7 a week in the bank. Unfortunately the bracing necessity of work, work and yet more work, literally enjoyed by my father, became for me a sheltered infirmity of purpose. For the first time in history necessity had receded enough to accommodate lackadaisical aestheticism. Even though my school had a scientific bias and most of its pupils left at 16 for careers in the executive civil service or business, it introduced me to life as enriched experience of the humanities. Most pupils at East Sheen Grammar School evaded the humane element and did well. I evaded its scientific provision and did badly. In any case humane study was my sole default mode because I was cackhanded. At home my Meccano set lay strewn around unloved, and at school woodwork stayed an artisan mystery. My shoe laces and ties got into knots or unravelled. I would arrive home from school wearing two caps one on top of the other. As for tying knots as a tenderfoot in the Cubs, I never achieved a single badge. 'Scouting for boys' was not for me, apart from mooning after Akela when she read from *The Jungle Book*.

My mother edged me away from my father's world without wanting to disrupt the faith at its heart. Although a very practical person, from the very start, and before my ineptitude was fully achieved, she did not want me held back by hands messy with engine oil and creosote. Apart from bedtime prayers she left religion to my father, and we only once had conversation about faith. I questioned her about some Old Testament miracle and she said that if God could create the rainbow, nothing else was beyond him. I had no wish to question further. The rainbow was not the kind of miracle I had in mind.

Wherever my father went, people cherished him as a lovable mixture of the canny and the transparent. Though delighted to secure a bargain, he was not at all a lean and hungry Puritan and he loved the groaning table of wholesome food my mother provided even in wartime. What Evangelicals give up in not drinking they make up in eating. My problem had nothing to do with absence of love at home or my father's absence from the domestic scene. He was around a lot. My mother deferred to him as the ultimate authority and his belt was mentioned as a sanction of last resort. Yet I never saw him so much as move to take it off. I was, however, quite often boxed sharply around the ears by my mother, and once hurled under the sideboard when I spoilt a new coat playing on the muddy banks of Beverley Brook in Richmond Park. My mother performed all the male roles (as then understood) apart from mending bicycle punctures and looking after

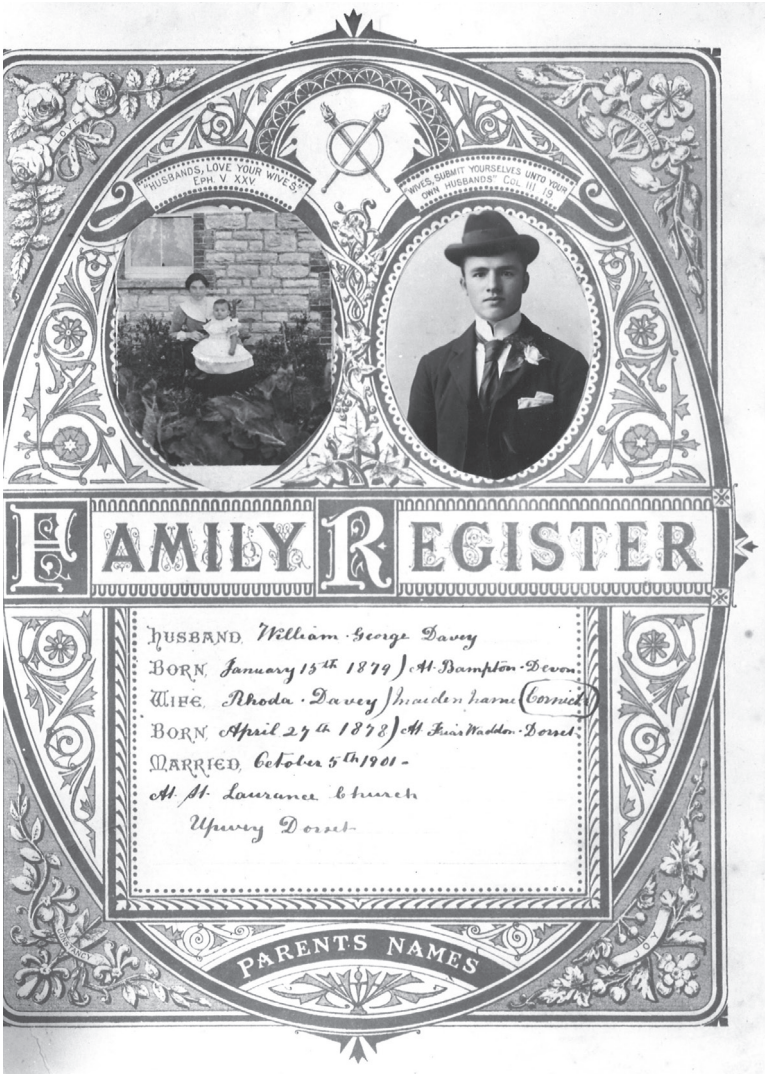
the car. She conducted all business transactions and was responsible for house repairs and house painting. Though a model of domesticity, I recollect the admiration she attracted from male passers-by painting the roof gutters on a high ladder.

This was a pattern of female practicality and initiative reproduced in my second marriage. I preferred and expected domestic arrangements based on informal matriarchy. My father's role was to earn our daily bread, though he sometimes played cricket with my mother and enjoyed playing draughts. That was it: mending punctures, cranking up the car, helping with the paraffin stove and putting up the tent on holiday, washing up and cleaning, always cleaning, either the car or domestic surfaces. His cars and (later) his taxis were polished till they 'shone as the sun in its strength'. What pertained to him *alone* was what Carlyle called the role of 'The Speaking Man', the charismatic preacher. It was as preacher he set my educational agenda. I had a Victorian childhood some three decades after the death of Victoria in 1901. That meant politics and power posed problems once I abandoned the idea the world could be saved if there were more Evangelicals like Wilberforce around.

I have only gradually realized the advantage conferred by problems. My academic colleagues might well be very sharp, but they sometimes lacked focus. I was focused. I just had to make sense of the role of religion in society and the nature of power and politics, especially sincerity and violence. I looked to sociology for clues to the problems set by a simple faith, only to find the problem might solve itself because sociology expected religion to wane rather than to wax. So I was engaged by the secularization thesis as well as by violence in religion. That became my academic vocation. I abjured complaint in favour of understanding. A desire to get the issue right displaced the waning pleasures of indignation.

Pentecostalism: my father born again in Latin America

Peace, war and violence, and the taken-for-granted secularization thesis were more than enough to provide the agenda of a lifetime. But then, as an extension of my critique of secularization, I stumbled on the remarkable growth of Pentecostalism in the 'Global South'. Here was my father's faith realized in a parallel world. One standard sociological reaction to Pentecostalism, supposing it even showed up on the radar, was to dismiss it as blocking the proper path of modernization. To begin with I was sufficiently misled by my discipline to suppose Pentecostalism a form of back-street abortion not likely to



Register in the family Bible:
maternal grandparents William George and Rhoda Davey, 1903

take off in the modern world. It took time to recognize it as one of the main forms of modernization. Hence a wry little book I wrote entitled *Forbidden Revolutions* (1993) on the Pentecostal revolution in Latin America and the (partly) religious revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe.

The events of 1989, and the global revitalization of both Christianity and Islam, exposed how shaky and restricted was the Enlightenment's vision of the approved path of progress. Pentecostalism replayed my childhood faith on a global scale. That childhood faith had always nourished a tendency to dissent, and I disliked the censorship many sociologists exercised against people not socialized in their version of the Enlightenment. I rejected any account of history as the supersession of religion by abstract reason and rationalization. I was now engaged by cultural revolutions in the majority world that contradicted everything some of my sociological colleagues at the LSE believed about the proper course of history. The cultural revolution of Pentecostalism was not the kind of revolution they believed in, or thought possible. As for the revolution some of them did expect, neither they nor I imagined the demise of the Soviet Union and the whole Marxist project.

It was only because my American colleague Peter Berger intuited Pentecostalism was my subject, and in the mid-1980s offered me the facilities to pursue it, that I came to track the largest shift in the contemporary religious landscape. It took me some while to realize I was early on the trail of a global revolution fully comparable to the revival of Islam, but unnoticed because not setting the West a problem. The moment I saw the Encyclopaedia and the Dictionary next to the Bible in the homes of Latin American Pentecostals I knew where I was. This was my childhood, my father's house and my mother's father's house, but far, far away, and much later. The moment I met Pentecostal street preachers in Latin America I recognized my father born again in places he could never have imagined. An Evangelical faith now marginal in England, though still massive in the States, was fast advancing all over the 'Global South'. When my wife and I visited Maronite Catholics in Lebanon they asked me whether I could envisage a Christian revival like the Islamic revival. I fumbled, oblivious to the obvious. Once I saw the light I was like a Jew who finds the covenant faith of his fathers implausible, especially after all that has happened to his people, only to observe the covenant seems not entirely abandoned.

Insider and outsider

My childhood was normal if you leave out all the churchgoing and lusty singing of revivalist choruses. Much of it was spent in competitive displays on bicycles, fighting toy gun battles between cowboys and Indians, a game like hopscotch called Box, skipping, and rituals, pursued under cover in tents, beginning with the phrase 'Doctor, doctor' and a request for an investigation of some intimate ailment. Yet Evangelicalism gave me the confidence to be an outsider, because itinerancy in search of the gospel ensures you never quite belong. Except for my mother, who stayed at home on Sunday morning preparing Sunday roast, we might attend Barnes Methodist Church, but we were still set apart and dubious about the religion propagated there.

This status of outsider, always semi-detached, affected my approach to everything. I was not properly integrated into my grammar school and pursued my own idiosyncratic paths; I went to teacher training college as a day student who rarely mixed with other students; I read theology without any scheme of study apart from a brief period in which I took local preachers' exams; I read sociology in the evenings, persistently dubious about what it took for granted; and when I joined the LSE as a lecturer I felt under sufferance as a peripheral attachment. Once when I gave a lecture in a minor institution of the university, somebody commented in amazement, 'You still think you're an outsider.' When I was made a Fellow of the British Academy, my son-in-law felt it was time to tell me, 'Listen David, this *is* the inside.'

Like almost everybody else during the Second World War, I was patriotic. Then in mid-adolescence I began to distinguish between attachment to a culture and chauvinism. I was attached to an *idea* of an England somewhere between Piers Plowman and Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, but opposed to heel-clicking patriotism. When a church parade was held in the middle of the war in Barnes Methodist Church I felt irritated by the intrusive clatter of soldiers forced to attend a service. So I wandered round Barnes Common with the score of the Ninth Symphony chanting 'Alle Menschen werden Brüder', 'All men shall be brothers'. Romantic naïveté already had me in thrall.

As for the Church of England, I felt it was common property and had profound affection for my *idea* of it. But even after I was confirmed about the age of 50, and in 1983–4 ordained deacon then priest, I remained a commentator from the sidelines, and was

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