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Chris Patten has no time for talk of the barriers to combining a career in politics with a strong religious faith, recently quoted by the leader of the Liberal Democrats to explain his resignation. “I don’t mean to be mean to Tim Farron,” says the former Tory party chairman, EU Commissioner and last British Governor of Hong Kong, “but if his party had done better in the election, they wouldn’t have wanted a new leader.

“My experience has been that more people worry about me being a Conservative rather than me being a Catholic. I have never found a sense of hostility to me because I am a Catholic.”

There have, he concedes, been odd moments when his religion has caused a few raised eyebrows. “I got into trouble as a junior Minister in Northern Ireland [in 1983] when I attended a civic lunch in Derry and made the Sign of the Cross as we said grace. This was taken by some there from the DUP as a great sign of my incipient treachery.”

Unionists may have regarded the young Patten as a “Catholic Minister”, sent by the British Government to challenge the stranglehold they exerted on political power back then. And, indeed, he remains proud of advances made at the time, helped by ministerial arm-twisting over discrimination against the Catholic community in housing and employment. But the now Lord Patten is clear that he never saw himself as a “Catholic Minister”. Neither, though, was he a politician who just happened to be Catholic. The truth, as ever in life, lies somewhere in between.

“Never, never, never did I keep quiet about my faith,” says the 73-year-old, dismissing Alastair Campbell’s infamous remark that his boss, Prime Minister Tony Blair, didn’t “do God”. “Part of my complicated identity is that I am a practising Catholic – words that are used as if you are hitting a ball against a wall all the time. It’s part of me, even if some people may not like it.”

He implies – though doesn’t quite say – that, unlike Farron, his faith hasn’t stopped him rising to the top of the political tree. Indeed, quite the contrary. He has held so many plum roles that sketch writers routinely labelled him “the grand Poo-Bah”, as high-level posting followed high-level posting after he successfully handed over Hong Kong to the Chinese Government 20 years ago.

His new book, subtitled *A Sort of Memoir*, is being published to coincide with that anniversary, but its real theme is the link between identity and politics. Who are we? With which pattern of loyalties do we

identify? Which narrative, memories and experiences shape our behaviour?

In seeking answers to these profound questions, the book covers more recent roles Patten has played, including his work on turning the old RUC into a non-sectarian police force for Northern Ireland (“that was the best thing I have ever done”), his less happy stint as chair of the BBC trustees, and his current comfy incumbency as chancellor of the University of Oxford. But by calling it *First Confession*, this trustee of *The Tablet* is surely making plain what lies at the very core of his identity.

His great grandfather was an Irish Catholic “economic migrant” from County Roscommon at the time of the potato famine. Chris Patten grew up in suburban north-west London, a 1950s childhood of “Mass and privet” as he puts it, the clever lower-middle-class scholarship boy who made his way to Oxford via Our Lady of the Visitation parish and primary school, run by the Pallottine Fathers in Greenford, and then St Benedict’s, Ealing.

One of his earliest memories is of his father tracing the letters INRI on his forehead as he put him to bed. “It is true that when I was a kid Catholics were still regarded as a bit odd,” he muses. “The mumbo-jumbo Latin, the incense, the candles. And I was an altar boy – *Introibo ad altare Dei*.”

He pronounces it boldly and a glint of schoolboy delight twinkles in his eyes. He may be delving into past glories in the book, but – unlike so many of yesterday’s politicians who overcrowd the red House of Lords benches – there is nothing of the back number about Baron Patten of Barnes CH, PC. In his soft but compelling voice, he is as outspoken in discussing the Brexit referendum – “two Conservative Prime Ministers have got us into the worst political mess I can remember in order to appease the English nationalist right wing of their party” – as he is in analysing the contemporary Catholic Church.

On the latter, he speaks with a certain authority, having rescued, at David Cameron’s request, the chaotic plans for Pope Benedict’s 2010 visit to Britain (Alex Salmond, then Scottish First Minister, was, he mentions in passing, “painful” to deal with). More recently he completed a report for the Vatican on its media operation, accepted in full by Pope Francis, but now languishing on a shelf awaiting implementation. “*Que sera, sera*,” he writes in the memoir.

He had privileged access to the Vatican, at close quarters. Is he a fan of Papa Francisco? “You can start from the assumption,” he replies in a roundabout way, “that people should be perfect and, if they are not, that you should smack them firmly over the hand. Or, you can start by thinking that none of us is perfect, and that we have to be helped to cope with what being alive amounts to.

“Of course, we are all, up to a point, perfectible, but we are more likely to be encouraged to do the right things if somebody understands the dilemmas that we face in modern life, and that is more likely to make the Catholic Church a welcoming institution than a scolding institution.”

I try to interrupt to nail down whether he is answering yes or no but, politician to his fingertips, he is not to be hurried. “You’ve got me going now,” he explains. “The most important of the Gospels is St Matthew. And my favourite painting – and I discovered the other day that it is also one of the Pope’s favourites – is the Caravaggio in the French church in Rome of Jesus with Peter coming into the tax office and pointing at Matthew. He is obviously saying, ‘You’re coming with me’. And St Matthew is looking as if to say, ‘What, me?’”

All are welcome is, of course, a favourite mantra of the pastoral Pope Francis. “It doesn’t mean,” says Patten, “that there aren’t rules which you attempt to follow, but it does mean that the rules are followed with love and kindness and understanding for the difficulty of being a human being.”

In his political career, expressing and applying such tolerant principles probably contributed to him being dubbed a “wet” by the hard-line Conservatives in Margaret Thatcher’s Cabinet. But there is another inclusive Pope Francis remark that he likes to quote.

“Knowing I am a Catholic, people occasionally challenge me about gay relationships. What I worry about is promiscuity. Whether it is homosexual or heterosexual doesn’t cause me a great deal of pain. But above all my position is that of Pope Francis: who am I to judge? God must love gay people in particular, because they’ve suffered from so much discrimination over the years.”

We are getting along so affably in a bright office at his publisher that I am reluctant to disrupt the harmony, but we are both old enough to remember how his then boss, Thatcher, was responsible for Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which outlawed the “promotion” of homosexuality in schools. It caused outrage in LGBT circles and far beyond. As one of her Ministers, did he support her in that controversial measure? “I was conveniently out of the country,” he replies.

One issue undoubtedly close to his heart is that of inter-communion. Lavender, his wife of 46 years (they have three daughters and eight grandchildren) is a devout Anglican. He takes Communion in her Church, despite Catholic rules forbidding it, but she cannot in his. “I hope before I die,” he says simply, “it will be resolved.”

There have, he admits, been times when the couple was tempted to go ahead regardless. “Hong Kong was a wonderful place to be a Catholic. The Church there was so vital and at the cutting edge of every difficult social movement. We had a Catholic parish priest who was talking to Lavender one day about her understanding of the Real Presence. At the end of the discussion, he said, ‘It’s fine by me if you come to Communion.’”

He doesn’t quite make clear if she took him up on the suggestion, but we are working our way back to that question of politics and identity again. Chris Patten is “proud to be a Catholic” and is emphatic that he has never wavered in his attachment to the Conservative Party, albeit on its moderate wing. Undogmatic in political terms, he is similarly undogmatic about his faith. “You can’t separate them out,” he says. “And I have always thought that moderation and being able to reach out to other people is what is most important.”

First Confession: A Sort of Memoir is published by Allen Lane at £20.

Peter Stanford-The Tablet