

‘GOD IN A SECULAR WORLD’

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My thanks to Gillian and Cardinal Sean – the Co-Chairs of the Conference, Myles, Tom, Pdraig and the organising committee for the invitation to give the annual address to the Greenhill’s Conference. It is an honour to do so, especially in this the centenary of the ‘week of prayer for Christian Unity’. My thanks to our hosts today for the welcome they have extended to us.

What I say here today I say in a personal capacity and the views expressed should not be taken as the views of Her Majesty’s Government.

Introduction

‘God in a Secular world’. Do we live in a ‘secular world’? Or do we inhabit a part of the world that happens to be secular? Today we will look at what we mean by ‘secular’. We will explore the validity of secularisation theory. We will compare briefly two different contexts in the separation of faith and state, i.e. the European model and the United States model; how they differ in structure and outcomes. Finally, I will conclude with some observations about how this post-secular ‘post-modern’ world holds challenges for faith groups grappling with adaptation; the increasing tendency to associate religion with violence; and discovering the place of faith in the public square.

Sometimes we are told that we are dealing with inevitability. I hope to show that when it comes to faith in the modern world, we are not dealing with an inevitable marginalisation or secularisation. Secularisation is not a necessary element or by-product of modernisation, but pluralism is. By looking beyond the European experience we will see

many situations where religion has acted as a spur to modernisation. In situations where there is a sharp distinction between church and state, as in the US, it does not have to lead to secularisation as it has in Europe, but can lead to a flourishing of faith. My aim overall in this text is to trace what is happening globally. Then perhaps we will have a clearer view of what is happening in our respective situations.

Perhaps at the end of all this we will go away with more questions than answers for there are no easy or quick solutions to some of the issues raised. Our societies are searching for a way to deal with an ever more complex world of faiths. Some may be tempted when faced with such a complexity to seek the solution in rolling back faith from the public sphere – a sort of contemporary Jacobin style process, but without the violence. But again what would you put in its place? Societies grapple with trying to find consensus and establish boundaries. In the absence of common assumptions/values how does one prevent anarchy? What does religious freedom mean in practice? What sort of licence does it give and does the right of religious freedom trump other rights?

There are also direct and difficult challenges for faiths. How do faiths respond to the charge that religion fosters violence? Or respond to those who ask us if we really are better off with religion? Faiths themselves might see retreat to a private sphere as the easiest route. And how do faiths deal with modernity and change, yet remain faithful to their fundamental traditions? These are some, but by no means an exhaustive list, of contemporary challenges in the faith-secular debate.

Secular

What is meant by secular; or Secularity; or Secularism; or indeed Secularisation? They all mean something different. Secular is an adjective. Secularity is a state of affairs. Secularism is an ideology, like rationalism or communism. And secularization is a process.¹

¹ Grace Davie's typology, *Europe the Exceptional Case*, Darton Longman Todd, 2002,

Charles Taylor in 'A Secular Age'² which was the recipient of last year's Templeton Prize, asks 'how we moved from a condition in 1500 in which it was hard not to believe in God, to our present situation just after 2000, where this has become quite easy for many.' Taylor contrasts secularism with religion. For him secularism sees human good and human flourishing as being focused solely in this world; while the religious outlook is transcendent.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is rather more specific. He describes secularism as opening a space, but also potentially closing a space. Positively a secular society would hold up ideals of freedom and equality. It would oppose any kind of theocracy, any privilege given to an authority that was not accountable to ordinary processes of reasoning and evidence. A secular society would have fair and open argument about how common life should be run because everyone would argue on the same basis; public reason. More negatively, secularism could rule out arguments which would arise from specific commitments of a religious or ideological nature. This approach is underpinned by the Enlightenment conviction that authority which depends on revelation must always be contested and denied any leverage in the public sphere.³

When getting at the meaning of secularism, Taylor rejects what he calls the "subtraction story" which sees science gradually chipping away at the credibility of faith hence leading to secularism. A sort of approach which sees secularism rising on the back of disillusionment with faith and its claims. Taylor's notion is that secularism and faith come from the same well. He traces secularism not through scientific discovery, but through history. A process which runs through the medieval, Reformation, Enlightenment, etc and that not only produces secularism, but new forms of religious awareness as well. In this way secularism is not pitted against religion. Secularism is part of a common inheritance – a positive part of our western culture and civilisation. Secularism in this sense is about a proper distinction between the temporal and religious

² Charles Taylor, 'A Secular Age', Belknap Press, 2007

³ Archbishop of Canterbury's lecture given at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome, 23rd November 2006

realms without any claims on the wider religiosity of society. Secularisation theory on the other hand attempts to describe a process of change ushered in around the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Secularization Theory

So what is ‘secularization theory’?⁴ Briefly stated it holds that as states modernise they secularise. The idea is very simple: the more modernity, the less religion. It is broadly based on empirical data from north western Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. For much of the 20th century it went unchallenged. It was commonly assumed that the world was following a trajectory set off in north western Europe at the time of the Industrial Revolution. But about 20 years ago it became clear that the statistics told a different story. Peter Berger, an eminent American sociologist and expert on religions, was long an advocate of the secularisation theory, but changed his view on the basis of the empirical data. He said recently ‘We don't live in an age of secularity; we live in an age of explosive, pervasive religiosity’⁵.

The secularization model was seen as one of the self evident truths of social science. In popular terms it still is. In a recent report, I read of ‘country ‘x’ standing out in this ‘post-modern secular world’ because for a substantial part of its population faith still mattered. I asked myself where this post modern secular world was. Even closer to home a senior cleric (a very senior one) unquestioningly said upon returning from a visit to the United States that when it came to religion, ‘they are where we were in the 1950s’. Now both statements say something about our view of the world and a Eurocentric position much beyond the remit of today’s discussion. We long believed, and it appears many of us still do believe, that secularization theory holds the answer to why religion is declining in Europe, and we project that to the wider world. It’s modernisation stupid! Or is it?

⁴ The secularization thesis is still advocated by Steve Bruce. David Martin accepts secularization, but that it takes place in very different contexts and Grace Davie advocates the notion of the European exception.

⁵ Peter Berger, Pew Forum on Religion

To be fair to the advocates of secularization theory, it is easy to look back equipped with data and disprove a theory. The advocates of the secularisation theory were right in part, but only in part. Secularisation theory answered a particular phenomenon in a particular region, namely industrialised and post industrialised Europe, where there was a dramatic drop in church attendance from agrarian societies to industrial and post-industrial societies. There is one other exception in the secularisation model and that is a very thin layer of the elite or intelligentsia across the globe. That layer tends to be highly secular.

But those who predicted the ‘Death of God’ were simply wrong. Those who extrapolated the European experience to the rest of the world were wrong. Those who said there was a correlation between economic, social and political modernity to decreasing religious practice were also wrong. The evidence from the United States, Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe points to religious practice either walking hand in hand with progress, and in some cases actually being the spur, or at least being a neutral variable.

Reflecting on this, some sociologists have argued that we focused on the wrong outcome when looking at modernization. Instead of modernisation producing secularism it produced pluralism.⁶ The sociologists argue that modernisation with its greater access to communication and exposure to difference, leads to an unprecedented degree of pluralism. Advocates of secularism hold that growing religious pluralism undermines the plausibility of all forms of religious belief. However, others argue that religious pluralism actually allows the religious needs of increasingly diverse populations to be more adequately met thus encouraging, rather than discouraging greater religious vitality.⁷ In such a pluralistic situation religious institutions thus become de facto voluntary associations. That voluntary nature is enhanced when you have a political and legal system, guaranteeing religious freedom.⁸

⁶ By pluralism is meant the coexistence in civic peace of different racial, ethnic and religious groups, with social interaction between them.

⁷ for a fuller explanation of this point see, Grace Davie, *Europe the Exceptional Case*, Darton Longman Todd, 2002, page 17

⁸ Berger (<http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=136>)

God in a Religious world and a Secular Europe

So the European experience of religion is not the global norm. Yet European attitudes to the religiosity of the U.S. suggest a continuing European trend to see themselves at the norm and the US as the exception. The figures tell a contrary story. The greater part of the world, both developed and developing is as furiously religious as ever.⁹ Let's take a brief look at some of the statistics.

- It is quite likely that by 2050 or so there will be three billion Christians in the world; the proportion of those who will be non-Latino whites, will be somewhere between 15 and 20 percent.
- In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians representing 10 % of the population; by 2000, that was up 360 million, to 46 percent of the population. That is the largest quantitative change that has ever occurred in the history of religion.
- The geographical and demographic center of Christianity is moving from north to south, and within a very few years European and North American Christians, will be in the minority in the world
- The proportion of people attached to the world's four biggest religions, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism – rose from 67% in 1900 to 73% in 2005 and may reach 80% by 2050.
- Pentecostalism and related charismatic movements represent one of the fastest-growing segments of global Christianity. At least a quarter of the world's 2 billion Christians are thought to be members.¹⁰

⁹ *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (editor, et al., 1999). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, and *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credibility* (1992)

¹⁰ World Christian Database

- In 1950 only 2.4% of South Koreans were Christian: now it is at 30%.
- About 800,000 Americans are converts to Buddhism from other religions.
- In the early 90s in Rio alone a new church was being registered every weekday
- There is a genuine religious revival in Russia - high majorities of people now say they are Orthodox or they are Christian and that percentage is growing.
- Estimates on China are difficult to come by, but experts speak of a massive increase in the interest in religion and certainly few now speak of the anti-religious Marxist stance of the past.
- Imagine a map of the Christian world as of 2050: Where will the largest Christian populations be? Based on current trends the list would start with the United States followed by Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia and China.

Europe is following the trajectory of the classic secularization model where increasing secularization moves in tandem with modernisation. But that is not the pattern in the U.S., Asia, Africa or Latin America. The statistical outlier is Europe. The rest of the world is either getting more religious or at least maintaining the status quo, and in many places becoming more conservative in religious terms. What about Eastern and Central Europe? It is too soon to predict what will happen in that region and there are mixed signs; from a revival in Russia to quite secular trends in some of the other former communist states.

We have to guard against too Eurocentric a view of secularization or religion. When considering religion, in particular Christianity, we should be aware of allowing a European bias/view to colour our perspective of the role of religion in a globalised society.

Perhaps it was such a bias that led Time in 1966 and The Economist in 2000 to repeat Nietzsche's prediction of the 'Death of God' (or at least the demise of God). There is scarcely a week now without a religious story on the front pages of our newspapers. We have seen in these first seven years of the millennium stories about the Saffron revolution in Burma, a debate on Europe's Christian roots, debates on the nature of Europe's migration, a re-examination of the parameters between the secular and religious realms, not to mention those using religion as a weapon in their terrorism.

Perhaps religion was always there as an issue in world affairs, but in the second half of the 20th century our lenses – or the elite's lenses - just didn't pick it up. With all the futuristic reports at the time of the Millennium I don't recall one which identified religion as a serious issue. The risk now is that we go to the other extreme and see a religious cause or base to issues and problems which are essentially about race, ethnicity, etc.

But why is Europe exceptional? In part it is historical. Europe has a particular structure of church-State relations which is not found elsewhere. We have unique constitutional connections (or at least a history of such) between church and state. Religion in Europe has over the centuries been in some way or another more identified with power. The argument goes that as people rejected different types of political power they also had to reject religion because the two were so intertwined.

But has Europe really rejected religion? We find in studies that there has been a fall off in church attendance and in adherence to the teachings of the churches. Yet there does not appear to be a falling off in terms of general affiliation. A marked falling off in the more Protestant north of Europe has not resulted, yet, in a parallel abdication of religious belief.¹¹ Still in the UK almost 70% of the population identify as Christian. Similar figures are presented for France and for the Scandinavian countries. Over 2 million people have taken the Alpha course in the UK. Grace Davie an eminent British

¹¹ Grace Davie, *Europe the Exceptional Case*, Darton Longman Todd, 2002, page 5

Sociologist describes this as 'believing without belonging'.¹² She argues that Western Europe is better described as un-churched rather than secular.

Davie asks if it is a case that Europeans are not so much less religious than populations in other parts of the world, but quite simply differently so?¹³ She points to the fact of the almost universal take up of religious ceremonies at the time of death and the prominence of the historic churches in particular at times of national crisis. Davie found that when you asked people in Europe about their faith – the looser your definition of belief, the higher the percentage of believers.¹⁴ I am not sure whether this would rebut or confirm the view that 'belief without belonging' over time leads to the erosion of belief. In the most recent study two indicators started to rise among younger people. One was belief in a soul and the other was belief in a "God in me." To capture this Davies uses the term "vicarious religion," by which she means people who don't go to church or voice strong religious beliefs themselves, but who want the church to be there when they need it. It has a symbolic value. She says that 'Europeans tend to regard their churches as public utilities rather than the more US type model of competing firms'. Many sociologists describe the European model as one based on obligation and the alternative model found in the US, Latin America, Africa and Asia as best captured by consumption or choice.

But some say that to understand Europe and the falling off in religion we need to widen the scope of our investigation even further into civil society. They map the general decline in many other types of voluntary activities which require commitment, namely Trade Unions, Political Parties, etc. Davies argues that when mapping certain communities one finds a decline of the churches precisely at the same time as a sharp and sudden decline in the Trade Unions. She claims that it has more to do with the collapse of close-knit working class communities which were centred on specific economic activities, than anything specific to religion alone. But while this may apply to the UK, it raises a problem, because Robert Putnam's book 'Bowling Alone' also identified the

¹² Grace Davie, 'Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging', Blackwell Publishers (Sep 1994)

¹³ Grace Davie, *Europe the Exceptional Case*, Darton Longman Todd, 2002 page 19

¹⁴ see *European Values Study*: 1981, 1990 and 1999-2000

significant reduction in membership of voluntary organisations in the United States.¹⁵ But he did not catalogue a corresponding fall off in membership of religious groupings.

This brings us to perhaps the major difference between Europe and the rest of the world: the very nature of the secular foundation found in Europe. I believe this is best illustrated by comparing the separation of church and state in the US and Europe; exploring the different structures and asking why similar principles of separation lead to very different results in each continent. This I believe, more than any other point answers our question about why Europe is the exception.

Secularism: A European and US version

- 20% of Europeans say that God plays an important role in their lives compared with 60% of Americans.
- 15% of Britons go to church each week compared with 40% of Americans.
- 75% of Swedes are baptised: only 5% go to church.

Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the Enlightenment, at least on the continent of Europe, as very anti-clerical and even to some extent anti-Christian.¹⁶ That was not the case in America. She writes “in France the essence of the Enlightenment – literally, its *raison d’etre* - was reason. “Reason is to the philosophe”, the *Encyclopedie* declared, “What Grace is to the Christian”. “Here reason was not just pitted against religion, defined in opposition to religion; it was granted the same absolute dogmatic status as religion.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Robert Putnam, ‘Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community’, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000

¹⁶ Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005,

¹⁷ Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, page 152

Jurgen Habermas, the German Philosopher and Social theorist, also contrasts the forms of secularism found in Europe and the US. For Habermas, the US form of secularism leads to 'a flourishing plurality of more or less autonomous religious associations'. The European form tends to see faiths as negatives.

Scholars of church and state have described the separation in the US as something which also protects the churches from the power of the state, whereas in Europe it is seen more as the reverse. This brings us back to the very nature of the American Enlightenment which was heavily influenced by the British Enlightenment. The separation of church and state in the US did not signify the separation of church and society. On the contrary it was all the more rooted in the society because it was not prescribed or established by the government.

Himmerlfarb writes that "In a sense, the French Enlightenment was a belated Reformation fought in the cause not of a higher or purer religion, but of a still higher and purer authority: reason. It was in the name of reason that Voltaire issues his famous declaration of war against the church. This was not however the Enlightenment as it appeared in either Britain or America, where reason did not have that pre-eminent role, and where religion whether as dogma or as institution, was not the paramount enemy. The British and American Enlightenments were latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief. There was no *Kul tur kampf* in those countries to distract and divide the populace, putting the past against the present, confronting enlightened sentiment with retrograde institutions, and creating an unbridgeable divide between reason and religion."¹⁸ Himmerlfarb put it thus "reason illegitimised not only the Catholic Church, but any form of established or institutional religion and beyond that any religious faith dependent on miracles or dogmas that violated the canons of reason."¹⁹

¹⁸ Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, pages 18-19

¹⁹ Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, page 152

Now context is all important. The Enlightenment in Europe had a baggage quite unlike America. Religion played a very different role in the society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, religion often found itself on an opposing political side to those looking for greater liberty and freedom. Often this led to religion being presented as opposed to modernism. Secularism thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy; to be modern was to be secular. In Europe (particularly in France) this has led to an Enlightenment which was about a 'freedom from belief'. But for Himmerlfarb, "In America, if the Founding Fathers did not look upon religion as the enemy of liberty, neither did the churches look upon liberty as the enemy of religion."²⁰

Another distinction feeding into the differing natures of the Enlightenment is that European religion was premised on territory. It was built largely on the parish system, which historically was civic as well as ecclesiastical. Religious life was profoundly dislocated by the Industrial Revolution. And it's at that moment that European religion is shaken to its core. To Europeans, it looked as if modernisation, urbanisation and secularisation were all part of a package.

America contrasted this in so many ways. It did not have a centuries old parish system. The American cities were ever evolving. The migration was not from parish to city, but from diverse cultures, including religions. From the near outset, the US was at least in Christian terms, religiously diverse. Religion was an aid to the immigrant and not something to be liberated from (we are now seeing that too in Europe where faith groups are often the first point of contact for immigrants arriving in the continent and a key vehicle to help immigrants integrate). The Industrial Revolution in the United States was accompanied with a sense of nation-building and a utility for religions which was to bind the populations together.

Writing in 1835 Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, contrasting the European situation – particularly the French situation – with the American one, said "The greatest

²⁰ Gertrude Himmerlfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, page 211

part of British America was peopled by men who, after having shaken off the authority of the Pope, acknowledged no other religious supremacy. They brought with them into the New World a form of Christianity, which I cannot better describe than by styling it a democratic and republican religion. This contributed powerfully to the establishment of a republic and a democracy in public affairs and from the beginning, politics and religion contracted an alliance, which has never been dissolved."²¹

On Europe, Tocqueville said, "The unbelievers of Europe attack the Christians as their political opponents rather than as their religious adversaries. They hate the Christian religion as the opinion of the party much more than as an error of belief, and they reject the clergy less because they are the representatives of the Deity than because they are the allies of government. I am fully convinced that this extraordinary and incidental cause is the close connection of politics and religion in Europe."

This finds resonance today among many sociologists and theologians. Professor Peter Berger said recently "There is a secularist ideology, very powerful in Europe that is opposed to Christianity. There is that thing called secularism, and it can be very fundamentalist."²² Rowan Williams describes it as 'programmatic secularism'. "A form which sees any religious or ideological system demanding a hearing in the public sphere as aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It assumes that the public expression of specific conviction is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction."²³ Even with France, the citadel of *laïcité*, the nature and scope is under discussion. In a recent speech in Rome²⁴, President Sarkozy said "I am calling for a positive laicism, that is to say, a secularism that watches over freedom of thought, of belief and unbelief, does not consider religion as a danger, but as an asset." Such a move would bring the European Enlightenment which is about 'freedom from belief' closer to the American model which is about a 'freedom to believe'.

²¹ Alexander de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chapter 17

²² Peter Berger see <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=136>

²³ Rowan Williams, Vatican City State, November 2006

²⁴ President Sarkozy, speech in Rome, 20 December 2007

Limits to Separation?

Some critique the US separation of church and state and find that the ‘freedom to believe’ form of the Enlightenment rests on a Judeo-Christian consensus or premise. They cite the Supreme Court cases in which Mormon polygamy was outlawed. To do so the Court relied broadly on a Christian definition of marriage. But more historically, in Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, he writes “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not violated, but with his wrath?” As President he said, “no nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be.”²⁵ Unpacking what separation means is problematic because it is really impossible to divorce a culture from its past.

But the same evidence of a Judeo-Christian foundation is found in the ‘freedom from belief’ European Enlightenment. There too the foundational norms of the society rest on a Judeo-Christian bedrock. In those countries which follow the more strict forms of the European Enlightenment, they still observe the major Christian holidays of Easter and Christmas and rest on the Sabbath.

The 20th century is littered with such attempts to rupture the culture of societies, whether it was in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany or Cambodia. Michael Burleigh²⁶ argues that, from the Jacobins in the French Revolution to communists, anarchists or Nazis, Europe produced a succession of ‘political religions’ that took on many of the features of the faiths they aimed to replace. The cost in human terms is well documented. The Jacobins recognised that post revolutionary society needed a new religion, or a surrogate one, a system of symbols and ceremonies bringing individuals together, but without the transcendent. They were not looking to abolish religion, just what they saw as the wrong type of religion, Catholicism. They quickly moved, to attempt to build a ‘republican

²⁵ cited in Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, pages 208-209

²⁶ Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda*, Harper Press

religion' with its own public festivals modeled on pagan cults and remaking the calendar.

But it is Judeo-Christian values that led and underpin the European and US separation of church and state. Lord Acton said that the liberty which we need to function in modern societies actually has grown out of the distinction of church and state. Tocqueville wrote "despotism can do without faith, but freedom cannot".²⁷ Rowan Williams argues that some aspects of liberal politics would be unthinkable without Christian theology and that these are the aspects that offer the clearest foundation for a full defence of active political liberty. For example the limitations to state's powers vis a vis individuals, owed its reasoning to Christianity. Christians believed that the state's power was not the ultimate sacred sanction. The Archbishop says in all of the theological and political history, the most significant point was always the recognition that what the state could properly demand of the citizen was limited by relations and obligations beyond the state's reach. The state was not preserved from falling into error or tyranny. The state did not have an unqualified right over consciences. Williams says that without a willingness to listen to the questions and challenges of the church, liberal society is in danger of becoming illiberal. Wholesale secularism as a programmatic policy in the state can turn into another tyranny – a system beyond challenge."²⁸ Pope Benedict speaking along similar lines says religion and reason need each other and they must acknowledge this mutual need.²⁹

The risk of this intolerance within secularism can lead to the loss of a common grammar or language which society needs to function in the medium and long term. Here there are signs that all is not lost. Even those who acknowledge that they are tone deaf when it comes to faith can see a utility for religion even if they do not share its creed. Habermas appears to be one such Philosopher. Habermas said that "it remains the case that liberal societal structures are dependent on the solidarity of their citizens. And if the secularisation of society goes off the rails, the sources of this solidarity may dry up

²⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, pt. 2, ch. 9), page 282

²⁸ Rowan Williams, *Academy of Social Sciences*, Vatican City, November 2006

²⁹ Josef Ratzinger cited in 'Habermas and Ratzinger 'Dialectics of Secularisation'', (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, page 55

altogether. That could well slacken the democratic bond and exhaust the kind of solidarity that the democratic state needs, but cannot impose by law. This would lead to the transformation of the citizens of prosperous and peaceful liberal societies into isolated nomads acting on the basis of their own self interest, persons who used their subjective rights only as weapons against each other.”³⁰ President Sarkozy also picks up this theme. He says secularism should not be a denial of the past. To uproot is to lose meaning; it is to weaken the foundation of national identity and to drain even more the social relationships that have such a need for memorable symbols.³¹ Charles Taylor writes that “Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions. It should not be depicted as a rupture, but as an evolving story of human history with the secular and the religious dimensions not juxtaposed, but emerging from the same story.”³²

Challenges for religion

Now what do these trends mean for faiths? There are several challenges which this throws up. The question of how faiths may adapt to ever changing circumstances and yet remain faithful to their core-truths is perhaps the biggest one. How may faiths deal with those who increasingly see religion as a source of evil? Finally, how may faiths discern the proper place of religion in the public square?

Adaptation

Let us look at adaptation. Modernisation is a reality, but a secularisation that commonly leads to the demise and marginalisation of faith does not have to be part of the package. Faith does not have to be a casualty of the Enlightenment. But how it turns out – can be highly dependent on the reaction of faith groups themselves. If they fail to respond to the challenge of modernisation by refusing to recognise the changed environment, or if they attempt adaptation and go too far in becoming indistinguishable from wider society, they face demise. How faiths adapt to the new environment and structures can be critical to the outcomes. It sounds daunting, but there are many examples within our lifetime.

³⁰ Jorgen Habermas cited in ‘Habermas and Ratzinger ‘Dialectics of Secularisation’, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, page 35

³¹ President Sarkozy, speech in Rome, 20 December 2007

³² Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, Belknap Press 2007

Let me give one illustration which will be somewhat fresh in our minds. Let us not forget that at the start of the 20th century, Catholicism had a very ambivalent attitude to democracy; and not until the 1960s was it at the forefront of support for religious freedom. What changed the stance of the Catholic Church towards democracy and religious freedom? Experience. With regard to democracy it was the positive experience of Catholic minorities living in countries like the United States and other English speaking countries, coupled with the negative experience of Catholics in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

The notion of democracy as practiced in the English speaking world gave the church a different and less threatening exposure to democracy. As we have seen earlier, at the heart of the continental form of democracy and Enlightenment, was often found an intolerant secularism. From the late 1940s onwards the Catholic Church began to endorse democracy.

In the early 1960s, the Church moved to embrace religious freedom, a shift marked by the Declaration of Religious Freedom as part of the Second Vatican Council. Prior to this the attitude of the Catholic Church was summed up as 'error has no rights'. That changed dramatically in the 1960s and it is no coincidence that the change came through the theology of an American theologian John Courtney-Murray whose work in the 1950s had been the subject of controversy in Catholic circles. The position of the Catholic Church today is that freedom of religion is an inalienable human right. We know that such developments were not confined to Catholicism alone; other Christian denominations also had to struggle in coming to terms with allowing freedom of religion and minority rights, but the how question here is what interests us.

The Catholic Church's accommodation of the 20th century on these two major areas, in my opinion, points to a way of reconciling 'modernity' while remaining faithful to core values. How Catholicism came to alter its world view towards democracy and freedom of religion could perhaps hold lessons and provide indications which could help similar

moves within other denominations and faiths. In Catholicism the universities played a central role in moving the debate forward. The universities developed a new narrative which provided a new world vision for Catholicism. But the other crucial lesson was that the moves did not come from the Catholic heartlands on the European continent or Latin America. Rather these dramatic moves came from the then periphery of the Catholic world, the experience in the United States.

Finding space in the public square

'Religion interfering in Politics'. We often hear this phrase, but what does it mean in practice. What is the political realm and what is the religious realm? Neither Social Science nor life provides us with neat compartments. Sometimes lazy assumptions are used when speaking of religion in public life. But getting the balance right is not easy in any democratic system. In a representative democracy there is no rationale for restricting faith groups from speaking out or participating in wider societal debates. Any democratic system that would attempt to do so would risk undermining its democratic credentials. Yet today's reality shows the need for a boundary as recent cases have illustrated that there are those who misuse faith to argue for violence or terrorism. So how do modern democracies allow freedom of speech and religion on the one hand, yet expect responsible behaviour on the other. How do faiths respect the distinction between church and state that is a modern feature of western civilisation? Here Pope Benedict says that the model is that religion and reason should restrict each other and remind each other where the limits are.³³ President McAleese, picking up this theme in a speech last year in Rome said "Reason sets a limit to the claims of religion and religion sets a limit to the claims of reason".³⁴

Our democracies depend on active citizen engagement. Faith groups surely, like any other organisation in our society must have the right to speak out and up on issues of common concern. So when someone again cites faith groups as interfering in politics or

³³ Josef Ratzinger cited in 'Habermas and Ratzinger 'Dialectics of Secularisation'', (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, page 77-78

³⁴ Address by President of Ireland to the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community Congress 'Values and perspectives for Europe's future', Rome, Friday 23rd March 2007

the state, ask yourself is it really interference or is it participation. Is this charge a means of restricting our expression of democracy? Is it the charge of an intolerant creed trying to undermine our plurality? For when someone takes an active interest in the governance of our societies, be they motivated by faith or not then our democracies are richer for it. Gordon Brown said “I trace the historical roots of liberty in Britain to a struggle for tolerance, by which I mean also a gradual acceptance of pluralism - a notion of political liberty that would allow those of different denominations and beliefs to coexist peacefully together.”³⁵ Habermas says that “It is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens consciousness of norms and their solidarity.”

Again an illustration, and here I quote the Sociologist Grace Davie on how one particular incident can create very different interpretations in our society. You remember back in 2004 when we had the hearings for the European Commission. The Italian candidate, Buttiglione, was nominated by his Government for the portfolio of Justice and Home Affairs. The portfolio included the area of equality legislation. At his confirmation hearing in the European Parliament he was repeatedly asked about his religious views. The European Parliament found that he was not fit to hold the office of Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs. Commenting on the event, Grace Davie says “does Buttiglione or the secular opposition represent the hard line, or, if you like to use the word, the fundamentalist position. Do you see Buttiglione as the conservative religious reaction, or do you see the secular opposition as the reactive force.”³⁶

No doubt there are many experiences and will be many more where the position of faith, whether it be a religious creed or a secular belief system will clash on issues they deem to be of fundamental importance. Finding an accommodation may not always be easy. Habermas speaks of a post-secular society. This is a society in which religion is holding its own in an increasingly secular environment. In the post-secular society if both sides

³⁵ Prime Minister Gordon Brown, In a speech on liberty at the university of Westminster 25 October 2007

³⁶ Grace Davie in <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=97>

agree to understand the secularisation of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have reasons to take seriously each other's contribution to controversial subjects in the public debate. The understanding of tolerance in pluralistic societies with a liberal constitution demands that in their dealings with unbelievers and those of different faiths, believers should grasp that they must reasonably expect that the dissent they encounter will go on existing: at the same time, however, a liberal political culture expects that the unbelievers, too, will grasp that same point in their dealings with believers. Habermas says that secularized citizens must not refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates.³⁷

Religion a 'good' or an 'evil'

Some say that the reason people reject religion in Europe at a greater rate than elsewhere is because it was so tied to war and violence throughout its history. Today the association of religion and violence is once more to the fore. Not all associations are justified. There can be a tendency to identify religious conflicts when they are really geo-political conflicts. But religion can increasingly become a lazy label to use to reduce complex struggles into simplistic frameworks.

Pope Benedict asks however, "If one of the sources of terrorism is religious fanaticism and this is in fact the case – is then religion a healing and saving force? Or is it not rather an archaic and dangerous force that builds up false universalisms, thereby leading to intolerance and acts of terrorism? Must not religion, therefore, be placed under the guardianship of reason, and its boundaries carefully marked off? If we have noted the urgent questions of whether religion is truly a positive force, so we must now doubt the reliability of reason. For even the atomic bomb is product of reason. Does this then mean that it is reason that ought to be placed under guardianship? But by whom and by what?"

³⁷ Jorgen Habermas cited in 'Habermas and Ratzinger 'Dialectics of Secularisation'', (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, pages 46-47 & 51-52

Religion is perceived as a threat because of its association with terrorism. Bringing it back to a situation where it is a vehicle for peace and helping resolve conflicts is a major challenge. For Pope Benedict religion and peace go together. He has repeatedly said that violence in the name of religion is not permissible and has to be renounced. There is a theological debate to be had, and that is taking place. But there are also powerful practical illustrations to be made.

Where better to make such an illustration than here – indeed here today. Many of us will have experienced the occasion when meeting the stranger during the years of the Troubles. Them asking us what it was about and them casting negative views on ‘institutional’ religion. Yet some of us know the positive and unique role that religion played in bringing the conflict to an end. That is a story that needs to be told. Whether it is meetings such as these or the quiet and courageous channels of communication kept open by people of faith, we would not have achieved what we have without the churches. Many of your number have been recognised and I was delighted to see that just before Christmas Harold Good was the recipient of the Methodist World Peace Prize. What happened here is but one example of faiths working for peace. There is also significant scholarship which documents the positive role of the mainline Christian churches in helping the democratising process in Africa or the positive role that Pentecostal Churches are having on political reform in Latin America.³⁸ The US Council of Foreign Relations cites that more than 30 of the 80 countries that became freer in 1972-2000, owed some of the improvement to religion.

Conclusion

So what of God in this secular world? The evidence would point towards the fact that the world is as religious as ever. But perhaps it is about something more than just numbers. Perhaps it is about something deeper – a mental framework or perspective. Then there is the issue about the interaction of the spiritual and temporal realm. That debate goes back as far as our civilisation and in many ways it is one of the defining themes that underpins

³⁸ Paul Gifford, *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*, 1995, Leiden, Brill and African Christianity: its public role, London Hurst & Co.

Western civilisation. From time to time the debate can heat up. We are living in such an age. And for faiths, in this secular world there are three delicate challenges. First how to adapt and yet remain faithful; second, how to sustain a legitimate voice in the public square; and third how to deal with the resurgent view associating religion with violence. These three points in my personal opinion are major challenges for ‘God in the world’.

Many myths still linger when it comes to faith and the secular order. One is that modernisation and secularity go hand in hand. We know that is not universally so. The second is that the Enlightenment separation of church and state is always hostile to religion. We know that that too does not always have to be the case and separation can actually lead to a flourishing of religion. The figures and experiences from beyond Europe’s shores prove that. So we are not dealing with inevitability when it comes to modernisation and religion. Thus ‘Agency’ is important and the response of faith groups to modernisation is crucial. Faiths have to adapt to the new set of circumstances that modernisation presents, in particular pluralism and the distinction between church and state. They have to be able to respond to a shift in attitudes among the population at large; perhaps a shift from a religion based on ‘obligation’ to one more focused on ‘choice’. Choice in the context of motivation to participate in a faith community. Faiths must also adjust to pluralism and learn to use a language and vocabulary that can deal effectively with those of other creeds, including those who profess a secular creed, while remaining faithful to their own traditions. Getting the shift right can lead to a flourishing of religious communities.

There is a growing risk in parts of our world that a common language or discourse is at risk of being lost.³⁹ Keeping that common language alive is a key challenge for those motivated by faith or by none. Why? Because our societies depend on consensus to function. That consensus will never be universal enough to encapsulate all. Pope Benedict says that “the rational or ethical or religious formula that would embrace the whole world and unite all persons does not exist; or, at least, it is unattainable at the

³⁹ Callus Brown, ‘The Death of Christian Britain’, London, Rutledge, spoke of the collapse of a shared discourse

present moment. This is why the so called ‘world ethos’ remains an abstraction.”⁴⁰

There will always be the disaffected, but our society needs a consensus and faith groups have a major role in maintaining that consensus.

There really is no choice in all of this – modernity is our reality and faith communities cannot retreat from wider societal engagement. There is a human instinct to recast the past as a lost golden age. But those periods too had their challenges and religion did not always play a positive role. But nor can those who are challenged by the increasing complexity of our multi-faith world find a solution in banishing or suppressing faith to the periphery of society. The challenge is to rediscover a shared foundation on which we can live and build. That does not have to lead to nihilism. It is an accommodation that values our differences as complementing the whole.

Thank you.

⁴⁰ Josef Ratzinger cited in ‘Cameras and Ratzinger ‘Dialectics of Secularisation’, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, page 76