

Sustaining Democracy

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Part I

Who Do You Think You Are?

The force of a law depends upon the extent of its justice. *Thomas Aquinas*¹

A state without justice is a robber band. *Augustine*²

In a recent cartoon in the *Metro*, two men of middle-eastern appearance are shown walking past a newspaper placard which reads: 'Immigrants must learn British citizenship'. One is saying to the other: 'I'm trying - I've stopped looking for work but I'm struggling with the binge drinking'.

This cartoon would have been incomprehensible 30 years ago, and for two reasons. Firstly, because vaguely middle-eastern looking people would not have immediately spelt 'Muslim'; but secondly because the cartoon's premise of uncertainty about good citizenship would have seemed absurd. In those days, a cartoonist might have played with the once controversial question of whether Britain was any longer a Christian country, but no one doubted what Britain stood for. Nowadays, no one in mainstream politics seriously asks whether Britain is a Christian country, but the nature of citizenship has become widely controversial.

In contemporary debate, linking religion with citizenship is at best anachronistic, at worst sectarian. It is now clear that modern Britain is secular, but that very perception parallels an emerging doubt over British identity itself. What is it to be a British citizen? Why, the cartoon even suggests that the good citizen might have something to learn from the Islamic values of industry and sobriety. Something has changed.

Lost identity

Brand Britain lacks market presence, and its customers lack a collective sense of ownership. A series of political initiatives witness to this perceived fading of communal identity: children should have citizenship lessons in schools; immigrants need to earn citizenship and attend ceremonies; national identity cards can distinguish us from outsiders. Some advocate the flag of St George to mark Englishness, while an oath of loyalty will seal our British credentials. The 2008 House of Lords debate on Britishness revealed widely diverse views and little consensus³. The political theorist, Vernon Bogdanor, recently observed that 'the Governance of Britain green paper suggests that... [Gordon Brown is] very worried about the notion of Britishness' and feels we have no uniting "narrative", as the Americans have through the war of independence and the French through their

revolution'⁴. Even the House of Commons, icon of our common culture, is tarnished. The Director of the Demos think-tank, Philip Blond, describes Britain as 'a bi-polar nation, a bureaucratic, centralised state that presides dysfunctionally over an increasingly fragmented, disempowered and isolated citizenry'.⁵

To some, this search for shared values seems a little panicky. For other commentators, Britain has become a 'network society' without a centre, just multicultural plug-and-play communities. We live, they say, in a society of peripherals, 'cultural communes' of identity in search of meaning⁶. And some of these peripheral communities are beginning to make disquieting demands.

There is no doubt that we are asking new questions about citizenship that go far beyond the Tebbit 'cricket test': questions about the "good life", about communal solidarity, the norms of a shared sense of belonging that govern our lives together. But not about religion. To phrase these issues in terms either of Christianity or of Islam, for example, seems simply divisive. When Margaret Hodge asked whether the Proms embody British values, she was widely taken to be criticising the Last Night, with its *Rule Britannia* and *Land of Hope and Glory*. The media response was split between those who regarded the traditional Last Night as the epitome of Britishness, and others who found its echoes of colonialism anachronistic. No-one mistook her to be opening a debate about the (rather dubious) theological content of *Jerusalem*. If Christian faith was once seen as social glue, holding together different regional, class and ethnic identities, the secularising insistence that religion be excluded from public life has failed to provide an alternative bond. It may be OK to speak of a 'moral compass' acquired as a child of the manse, but British politicians do not do God. At least, not until they retire. Google 'Christian country' and you will more likely find a music group than the UK.

Democracy's Christian Heritage

But if we now agree that Britain is no longer perceived as a Christian country, there is a widening recognition that Western democracies have a Christian foundation and heritage. This is no longer limited to the usual suspects. Of course, Archbishop John Sentamu believes that Christian faith is woven into the fabric of British society⁷. Similarly, Cormac Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor argued that 'Judaean-Christian values' have bound British society together, and that an 'aggressive

secularism' is fragmenting the UK⁸. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali pointed to the widespread questioning of 'British identity' and traces it to the loss of an idea of 'a unified people under God'⁹. It would be surprising if senior clerics believed differently. More notable is that several British politicians past their peak have recently explored this Christian heritage, and penned biographies of Wesley, Wilberforce and John Newton¹⁰. General Sir Richard Dannatt prefers a nautical metaphor: 'Our society has always been embedded in Christian values; once you have pulled the anchor up there is a danger that ... [it] moves with the prevailing wind'¹¹. Equally striking is Tony Blair's desire to 'awaken the world's conscience', his establishment of his Faith Foundation to 'make the case for faith itself as relevant, positive and a force for good in the modern world', and his Yale fellowship lectures on Faith and Globalisation¹². At the other end of the political spectrum, David Cameron's 'moral capitalism' has

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recently drawn on the ideas of Philip Blond, an Aquinas specialist, for a critique of unfettered capitalism. In traditionally secularised Germany, Angela Merkel has referred to Christianity's 'decisive' role in forging European identity¹³. In the United States, Barack Obama insists that 'we need to take faith seriously... to engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal'¹⁴.

In intellectual debate, widely influential thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion have stimulated discussion of Judeo-Christian theology within European, especially French, philosophy¹⁵. Jurgen Habermas is, perhaps, Europe's most distinguished living philosopher, and describes himself as a 'methodical atheist'. In recent years, he has repeatedly referred to Enlightenment indebtedness to Judaeo-Christian sources, saying, as if this were a truth universally acknowledged among us:

'Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk'¹⁶.

He argues that, if we fail to engage with religion and publicly neglect the tradition which gave birth to Western culture, we risk alienating ourselves from our own self-understanding.

Nor is this insight limited to Europe. The US sociologist Jose Casanova's discussion of the role of religion in the 'reconstitution of the public sphere' is close to that of Habermas: 'Religious traditions are now confronting the differentiated secular spheres, challenging them to face their own obscurantist, ideological and inauthentic claims. In many of these confrontations, it is religion which... appears to be on the side of human enlightenment'¹⁷. Charles Taylor, the Templeton prize-winning Canadian philosopher, has argued that an adequate response to 'terrorism' involves the West in a serious examination of the role of spirituality in social life¹⁸. Michael Sanders, the current Reith Lecturer, advocates the recovery of moral and spiritual values in political life. As our very own Terry Eagleton observes, the liberal notion of freedom derives from Christian sources, and '... the Jewish and Christian scriptures have much to say about some vital questions - death, suffering, love, self-dispossession, and the like - on which the left has for the most part maintained an embarrassed silence'¹⁹.

Several authors have observed that instances of a Christian contribution to democratic reform are not limited to the distant past. Both Jose Casanova and Samuel Huntington, each from their distinctive perspective, have noted the role of Christianity in the wave of democratisations that took place in the late twentieth century, especially following the collapse of the USSR²⁰. In Huntington's case, he argues for a specific correlation between Christianity and democracy, leading to his rather combative image of a clash of (religiously based) civilisations; this has caught the public imagination, with its vision of drawing up 'the battle lines of the future'²¹.

There are more measured voices. Some thirteen years ago, Stephen Carter found the Clinton presidential ear with a similar message to Habermas': democracies have built upon a Christian legacy, and the moral visions of abolitionism and the civil rights movement sprang from the prophetic Christian conscience²². He advocates maintaining a specific role for religious communities as a resource to strengthen democracy and ensure its well-being. More recently, Barack Obama has similarly argued that much of US law is 'grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition' and that 'secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square...'²³.

Where once the 'mistaken Enlightenment prediction' that religion would 'wane in the shadow of progress' obscured the role of religion in public life, some scholars are now noting that many reforming

movements have had a religious base²⁴. On both sides of the Atlantic, a modest 'religious turn' in social philosophy is under way, and some prominent atheists are singing from the same hymn sheet as bishops and cardinals.

Evidence for Christian legacy

Of course, when we look at the evidence, it is surprising that there was ever any doubt about the role of prophetic Christian insights in the formation of Western social and political institutions. The ideas of a 'balance of powers', of a 'social contract' and of 'human rights' all owe much to the concepts of 'sin', 'covenant' and the equality of all in Christ. As John Howard Yoder observes, 'popular education, institutionalised medicine, and the very concept of dialogical democracy... generalise patterns which were first of all experimented with and made sense of in free-church Christianity'²⁵. Oliver O'Donovan has argued that the origins of international law lie in the medieval Papacy, and that the 'coherence of political conceptions as such' depends upon 'the faith expressed in the [Christian] creeds'²⁶. Most people are aware that the hospitals, schools and social services of the modern democratic state had their origins in Christian initiatives. Fewer are aware that the Green and Animal Welfare movements were inspired by biblical texts²⁷. The British Probation Service originated with the Police Court Missionaries; Health and Safety legislation, a favourite Aunt Sally, had its sixteenth century precedent when John Calvin insisted that all Genevan balconies have childproof railings. As for immigration, we might do well to contemplate the Puritan George Walker's observation in 1641 that 'even the cursed Canaanites allowed Abraham to sojourn in their land'²⁸. Some 15 years later, his co-religionist, Oliver Cromwell, presided over the first re-admission of the Jews to England since their expulsion in 1290, and the establishment of a synagogue in London's Creechchurch Lane.

Given the extent of the evidence, the wonder is that the role of prophetic Christianity was ever in doubt. As Casanova observes, only 'secularist or rationalist prejudice' would exclude religion as carrier of an ethical vision²⁹. Yet it has been excluded; and among die-hard secularists, it still is. For fundamentalist atheists such as Richard Dawkins, religion is the root of all evil.

A disquieting thought

The increasing recognition that Western democracies owe much to their Christian heritage has been accompanied by a disquieting thought. Might the secularisation of Western societies have consequences for a culture so indebted to Christianity? It is gradually dawning on perceptive commentators that democratic citizenship, even democracy itself, might be in trouble once cut free from its Christian moorings. To change

metaphor, how long can the building stand once its foundations are removed?

During his third voyage, Captain Cook observed that the Polynesians strictly forbade certain taboo practices, but could give no account of the reason for the prohibition. Anthropologists have subsequently suggested that the taboos once reflected complex religious beliefs which had long since disappeared, leaving the taboos as free-floating cultural values. Within a generation of Cook's visit, these taboos had disappeared. In the absence of the beliefs which gave them meaning, the free-floating taboo practices had proved unable to sustain themselves and had simply faded away³⁰. Are the liberties of Western democracy like the taboos of Polynesia? Can they survive in the absence of the beliefs which gave them meaning? The old secularisation thesis suggested that it would be religion that would fade away with the dominance of Enlightenment science. Indeed, it is a long-held secular assumption that modern liberal democracies *require* the marginalisation of religion to mere private belief. Charles Taylor is disdainful of this assumption, and argues that it is actually rootless communal solidarity and freedom that is fragile³¹. It would be ironic if it were secularised reason and values, floating free of their religious roots, which proved vulnerable to cultural 'fade'³². Then we would indeed be left with the 'postmodern chatter' of competing understandings of truth, love and justice.

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But surely we can be confident that liberal democracy, as a marker of Western societies, is firmly established and self-sustaining. Yet a number of serious academic commentators have questioned this confidence. In recent years, they have been joined by political and establishment voices expressing concern at the rapid erosion of civil liberties and human rights in the US and UK. As a result, there is a new focus on the role of religion in sustaining democracies which historically germinated in religious soil. Can democracies shake off their Christian past without shaking off the liberties which flowed from it? Habermas has been especially sensitive to these issues, perhaps because his own childhood in the Germany of the 1930s was overshadowed by the unexpected vulnerability of democracy in the land of Beethoven, Kant and Goethe. Three causes for disquiet stand out:

The disenchantment with modernity

Firstly, twentieth century attempts to establish secular states on atheistic principles do not inspire confidence. Atheistic ideologies, whether of the right or left, have spawned the bloodiest regimes on record. It was the secular twentieth century, not the religious fourteenth, which invented 'ethnic cleansing', WMDs, collateral damage and the industrial-scale holocaust. Indeed, for Habermas, the twentieth century was characterised by 'radical evil' for which the Holocaust is a 'historical index'. Modern humanity has gazed into 'the barbaric reverse side of its own mirror'³³.

By the mid twentieth century, the root of this barbarism was located in a failure in the Enlightenment project itself. Luttwak sees 'Enlightenment prejudice' as a baleful influence persisting throughout the century. While religion remained important in the lives of the individuals and societies discussed by intellectual descendants of the Enlightenment tradition, 'religious motivations in secular affairs... were disregarded or dismissed as mere pretence.' 'Enlightenment publicists and philosophers... strangled free inquiry... [By] the commanding force of the fashion they imposed..., the Enlightenment denied intellectual respectability to ... spiritual explorations'³⁴.

The role of the Enlightenment project in barbaric suffering, united with the perceived failure of science to realise the promised land and democracy's totalitarian potential, has produced a widespread loss of confidence in the old certainties of reason, progress and freedom.

In modernity, religious moorings were loosened in favour of instrumental rationality and market exchange, but these locked us into an iron cage of impersonal bureaucracy, environmental degradation and over consumption, and failed to bring the promised emancipation.

As globalisation homogenises international consumption, it further jettisons religious anchors without establishing any clear emancipatory alternatives. The West ignores the lessons of the twentieth century at its peril.

The early twenty-first century has seen new developments raising equally serious problems. The apparent inability of democracies to

tackle environmental crises which require a long term vision has caused widespread disillusion with traditional democratic processes. Moreover, major democracies have shown a willingness to use both military force and torture in order to spread their democratic vision. As O'Donovan argues, this 'expansionist demand to

impose democratic forms' on other societies raises questions about democracy's totalitarian potential, and has contributed to a new 'postmodern' suspicion about democracy itself³⁵. Indeed, Philip Bobbit argues that globalised market forces are making the modern nation state obsolete. New 'market states' face novel challenges from their perverse doppelganger, global "terrorism". These challenges demand changed methods and technologies of warfare which erode the civil liberties traditionally seen as fundamental to democracies. The consequences include pre-emptive strikes, radical surveillance and coercive measures against individuals³⁶.

'Postmodern chatter'

The role of the Enlightenment project in barbaric suffering, united with the perceived failure of science to realise the promised land and democracy's totalitarian potential, has produced a widespread loss of confidence in the old certainties of reason, progress and freedom. More recently, climate change and environmental degradation have turned the knife in the wound. We live in the first generation of modern times whose children question whether they will have a better life than their parents.

The big, unifying stories such as Liberty, even Capitalism or Socialism, have been exchanged for small local accounts, niche politics, do-it-yourself religions and identities. This loss of confidence in the big stories of science and progress has seen the mushrooming of local, fragmentary and "heritage" narratives, some of which have enfranchised the interest groups involved. If globalisation has produced transnational companies, it has also moved power from the centre to the periphery. While international McBrands ride roughshod over client cultures, local and regional identities re-assert themselves. As the market squeezes human relationships into consumer moulds, a thousand different versions of the good-life bloom. If the global media centralises around a few publishers, Web 2.0 technologies generate new social communication networks. Accompanying international marketing comes international migration and the globalisation of once local cultural traditions. In Britain we see a smorgasbord of communal loyalties, family patterns, political interest groups and life style preferences. Ideologues of right and left find themselves "so last century" - outdated and wrong footed. Successful politicians recognise that the world has changed, and move to the diverse centre. Accusations of focus-group driven pragmatism have replaced those of blinkered ideology.

Along with the demise of the big stories of modernity go the big ethics of modernity. The language of ethics (good/bad, right/wrong, just/unjust) has been replaced with that of toleration and 'respect', the recognition without judgement of a differing life-style. Those who persist in using the old language of virtue are likely to

meet either censure or derision. David Cameron faces this issue when he uses the morally qualified rhetoric of the 'broken society', defensively adding that neither the political system nor the public sector dare use the language of right and wrong for fear of 'appearing judgemental'. Other politicians go with the flow. For example, Michael Pollan quotes Dick Cheney as dismissing energy conservation as a 'sign of personal virtue', and asks 'how did it come to pass that virtue - a quality that for most of history has generally been deemed, well, a virtue - became a mark of liberal softheadedness', setting 'you up for ridicule'³⁷?

Wedded to its 'narrow and intolerant understanding of public reason', the old monolithic secularism is losing its footing in an increasingly diverse world³⁸.

The liberal left once encouraged the flowering of diversity, but the downside of fragmentation is now receiving more attention. Multiculturalism is associated with security issues in a way undreamt of even 10 years ago, and liberal commentators such as Johann Hari despair of it³⁹. 'Postmodern chatter' may empower the micro-politics of interest groups, but it provides no ground for liberty, justice or truth, the traditional bedrock of democracy⁴⁰.

Global religious resurgence

Thirdly, contemporary democracies, whilst they emerged from prophetic Christianity, are now associated with secularised states. This would not much matter if the old secularisation thesis were true. If modernising forces automatically led to the secularisation of religious societies, then democracy, supposed partner to secularisation, would be a natural next step. But we are witnessing a global resurgence of religion including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, notably in the developing world. Moreover, as the *Metro* cartoon suggests, religious identity is no longer simply geographically drawn. Cultural and religious loyalties may be transnational or even global. And for cultures which wish to remain religious, democracy's association with secularism now counts against it. Especially when secular societies have proved to be so bloody in the twentieth century, and often appear morally corrupt and decadent to the religious eye.

This global *desecularisation* raises the question whether democracy, paired with *secularism* in the West, might come off the rails in Europe also. Indeed, the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' reflects concern about precisely this possibility.

Klaus Eder uses the term 'post-secularism' to refer to the recent resurgence of religion; others speak of the 'deprivatisation of religion', or of religion rather than ideology as the new cultural driver⁴¹. This may overstate the case, but it is sufficiently close to the mark for there to be an 'atheist fight-back against resurgent religion'

which Johann Hari dates to 2006⁴². Secularists, who thought that they had buried religion, at least in the public sphere, have been shocked to see it seemingly raised from the dead. The strident voices of sawn-off materialists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are loud in protest.

Astonishingly, in secular societies of the early twenty-first century, there is both an emerging religious debate, and a lively debate about religion.

Secular strategies

Faced with the perceived vulnerability of democracy to global forces, two principal secular strategies have emerged. Firstly, there is the traditional moral impulse to identify 'evil' and eliminate it: the 'War on Terror'. Secondly, we see the strategy of reasserting secular liberalism, sometimes associated with an aggressive New Atheism.

The horrifying violence unleashed by the first strategy is evident to all, as is its impotence to address the issues. As for the second, sceptical commentators have questioned the ability of the old liberal consensus to renew itself from within in the face of global forces. Moreover, when faced with a threat, secular liberalism shows a tendency to collapse into the traditional moralism which brought us the War on Terror. Prominent liberal apologists such as Johann Hari and Christopher Hitchens both advocated the invasion of Iraq, although Hari has since resiled. We might contrast this with the warnings issued from across the spectrum of Christian theology, rooted in the prophetic 'just war' debate of the past fifteen centuries. The opposition of 'liberal' secularism to 'conservative' religion is here, as elsewhere, revealed as simplistic.

Some commentators, both religious and secular, doubt modernity's ability to replenish itself from such impoverished secular strategies, and have looked to religious resources for renewal. They ask radical questions. If modern democracy was inspired by religious narratives, is it capable of renewing its normative foundations from within its own depleted resources? Or does it require a religious repository of otherness, an ethos to counter the weight of modernity's competitiveness, consumption and control? Might religious resources be able to 'rein in modernity' in a way that would be beyond the ability of a purely instrumental, commercial and media-driven society.⁴³ Is there, in fact, any 'clearly recognizable alternative' to religious resources given current global politics?⁴⁴ Or is the instrumental use of religion in this way simply another attempt to co-opt it in service to materialism and wealth?

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Summary

I have drawn attention to a range of authors who question the routine assumption that democracy is safe in secular hands. Some consider that liberties which we have taken for granted for a generation risk derailment from global forces; others that internal stresses undermine the integrity of secular citizenship; still others that secularism, carried by its founding religious values, has been riding on the bus without buying a ticket – and has reached journey's end. Since most of these authors discussed the political settlement of Western Europe and North America, 'religion' means 'Christianity'. This is not to imply that other religious world views have been entirely without influence. Indeed, both ancient Greece and Islam have been historically significant in European culture. But as a matter of empirical fact, the religion which has contributed most has overwhelmingly been Christianity. It might seem, then, that a moribund secularism needs a dose of Christianity to revitalise it, to provide ethical guidance for the future. I will argue below that this instrumental understanding of 'religion' as medicine to restore secularism would be an error. Firstly, because 'secularism' itself has become 'religious', claiming the privileges of religious judgement, and complete with its own 'high priests'⁴⁵. Moreover, it is a religion which claims sovereignty in the public sphere, to the exclusion of other religions. It is not, then, simply an ethical input which is required, but the dis-establishment of a 'secular' religion and the opening of the public sphere to a prophetic Christian understanding of tolerance towards all religions, including that of 'secularism'. Merely treating religion as a source of values or a motivation for ethical thinking is to misunderstand the nature of religion. The remainder of this paper will discuss the possibility that Christianity, having bequeathed its democratic legacy to modernity, might also be necessary to sustain that legacy; and the substantial difficulties which lie in the way of its doing so. 'Western modernity is at a crossroads... it may end up being devoured by the inflexible, inhuman logic of its own creations [i.e. capitalist consumerism and the administrative state]. It would be profoundly ironic if, after all the beatings it has received from modernity, religion could somehow unintentionally help modernity save itself'⁴⁶.

¹Summa Theologica 2.1.Q95.art2.obj4

²City of God IV Ch4

³Lords Hansard 19.6.08 1140

⁴The Guardian 17.02.09 p9

⁵http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=10608 - accessed 8.03.09

⁶See Manuel Castells 'The Information Age' vol 1: the rise of the network society, and vol 2 p68f

⁷Easter sermon 2008 and BBC radio 4 interview on the same day

⁸The Guardian 2.4.08 p16

⁹<http://www.standpointmag.co.uk:80/node/85> - accessed 30.5.08

¹⁰Roy Hattersley 'Life of John Wesley'; William Hague 'William Wilberforce'; Jonathan Aitken 'John Newton'.

¹¹<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article410175/Sir-Richard-Dannatt-A-honest-General.html> accessed 5.6.08

¹²Independent 4.4.08 p6

¹³Merkel 29.8.06 euobssrver.com

¹⁴Obama (2006) 'The Audacity of Hope' p216

¹⁵For a discussion of the debate, see D Janicaud et al (2000) 'Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"'. For a recent example beyond Continental Europe, see Terry Eagleton (2009) 'Reason, Faith and Revolution'

¹⁶Jurgen Habermas (2006) 'A Time of Transitions' p150/1.

Habermas' recognition of religion seems to have been triggered by his concern at postmodern irrationalism such as he finds in Derrida.

¹⁷Jose Casanova (1994) 'Public Religions in the Modern World' p234 & p230f

¹⁸http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/jan-june07/templeton_03-20.html accessed 5.1.09

¹⁹Op cit p xii

²⁰Jose Casanova (1994); Samuel Huntington (1991) 'The Third Wave' p72ff. Francis Fukayama also recognised that democracy had emerged in culturally Christian countries but rejected the necessity for such cultural values: 'The End of History' (1992)

²¹<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html> - accessed 26.5.08

²²Carter 'God's Name in Vain' p4; 'The Culture of Disbelief' was said to have been among Clinton's bedtime reading. By 'prophetic' Christianity, I will mean confessions rooted above all in scriptural revelation, and lived out in communal life. Exemplary instances may be found in the European Reformations, but prophetic Christianity is not restricted to one historical epoch. For a discussion of 'kingly' and 'priestly' religion, see O O'Donovan op cit

²³Op cit p 218; also p213f

²⁴Edward Luttwak (1994) 'The Missing Dimension' p10 in D Johnson & C Sampson 'Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft' Pp 8 – 19. For the religious base of reform see, e.g., R Hackett (2005) 'Rethinking the Role of Religion in Changing Public Spheres' Brigham Young University Law Review <http://lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2005/3/5HACKETT.FIN.pdf> accessed 20.5.08

²⁵'The Kingdom as Social Ethic' p92 quoted in M T Nation (2005) 'John Howard Yoder'

²⁶O'Donovan (2005) 'The Ways of Judgement' p216f and pxiiv

²⁷Sampson 'Six Modern Myths'

²⁸G Walker (1641) 'The History of the Creation' GM for John Bartlet London p222.

²⁹Op cit p233

³⁰This analogy is modified from Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) 'After Virtue: a study in moral theory' p105f

³¹'A Secular Age' (2007). Casanova (2004) Ch 1 notes that 'secularisation' as a theory of religious decline with progressive modernisation has been proven to be empirically false.

³²The word "secularisation" carries the legal meaning of a forced transference of Church properties to the State. The purloining and transfer of religious meanings followed. But unlike property, meanings do not necessarily survive the move.

³³Habermas (2002) 'Religion and rationality' p 167, 130. It is of course possible to find predecessors of modern phenomena such as ethnic cleansing or collateral damage. However, Habermas is surely right in seeing a distinction between the local, fragmented

and disorganised instances of the past, and the systematic, bureaucratised and scientific atrocities of the present.

³⁴For the mid-twentieth century critique, see T Adorno & M Horkheimer (1947: 2002) 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'. Luttwak op cit pp8-9. The later twentieth century evidenced an extensive critique of the Enlightenment's complicity in the evils of modernity. There is much in this critique which provides a necessary corrective to naive rationalism, but we should remember that the Enlightenment tradition itself drew on Christian sources. Moreover, it is far from moribund. Adorno and Horkheimer already pointed to a revisioning of the Enlightenment project which they saw as its fulfilment. More recent authors such as Anthony Giddens have seen postmodernity as a cure worse than the disease, while Jonathan Israel has provided a vigorous defence of the Enlightenment tradition. Indeed, Israel's 'Enlightenment Contested' (2006) argues a case in many ways opposed to that presented here by seeking to identify a 'hard-core' radical Enlightenment (e.g. p808f). These debates show how alarmingly oversimplified is the popular perception that democratic health lies in the clinic of the Enlightenment.

³⁵Oliver O'Donovan (2005) 'The Ways of Judgement' p174

³⁶P Bobbit (2008) 'Terror and Consent'

³⁷David Cameron speech Glasgow East 7.7.08; M Pollan Guardian 6.6.08 p6.

³⁸Hackett op cit p670

³⁹Johann Hari Independent 11.2.08

⁴⁰Sampson et al 'Faith and Modernity' Ch1. Habermas's derision of 'postmodernity' overstates his case and underestimates the benefits to, for example, ethnic and gender politics; nevertheless, his central critique holds.

⁴¹Giancarlo Bosetti and Klaus Eder, "Post-Secularism: A Return to the Public Sphere," Eurozine, Aug. 17, 2006 <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-08-17-eder-en.html>. Jose Casanova (1994) 'Public Religions in the Modern World' - accessed 26.5.08

⁴²Independent 21.12.06 p37. Revealingly, Hari references 'Elisha 2.22' (sic) (God 'feeds small children to bears') to support his case.

⁴³Habermas (2001) Speech to German Book Fair

⁴⁴Habermas 'Reason and Rationality' p153.

⁴⁵Maurice Chittenden and Roger Waite have called Richard Dawkins 'the high priest of atheism' .The Sunday Times 23 December.2007:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article3087486.ece> accessed 21.7.08. The soubriquet is, however, common, as a Google search will show.

⁴⁶Casanova op cit p234

Part II

Religion as ‘Hobby’

There is currently both a global resurgence of religious practice, and a lively debate among some religious and secular commentators about the public role of religion. As Eagleton notes, ‘the most unlikely people, including myself, [are] suddenly talking about God’⁴⁷. But it would be misleading to suggest that there is a widespread religious turn in political debate either at a popular level or among Western elites. There is not. It is true that the debate about religion has some very distinguished protagonists, but for the most part a secular orthodox consensus rules unchecked in the public life of Western democracies.

This is not necessarily homogeneous. Elites may secularise more quickly, including both media and political elites. While much of the population may remain privately religious, perhaps pursuing informal ‘spiritualities’ via social networking sites or even attending churches and mosques, secular elites control language in the public sphere, and that language is, unsurprisingly, secular⁴⁸.

A keynote of this dominant secular language is that liberal democracies developed because religion was excluded from the public sphere, and their preservation relies upon religion’s continued exclusion. The public sphere is thereby claimed to be neutral and tolerant. As we have seen, this story is at best an oversimplification, but it foregrounds the very widespread belief that the secularisation of the public realm has provided a neutral space for open debate in which religious confessional identities have no place. The Enlightenment is usually seen as the turning point.

Now, spheres of open debate long predated the Enlightenment, and they did not necessarily exclude confessional discourse; church councils provide obvious examples. Moreover, the Enlightenment itself was richer in religious language than is often supposed. But the most important misperception here is that the secular control of the public sphere is either neutral or facilitates open debate. It does neither. Rather, the identification of the public with the secular gives priority to secular values and destroys the very possibility that debate could be open or neutral. The ‘secular’ expands without limit, squeezing out alternative visions of the public good. Ultimately, the secular itself becomes confessional, a religious domain authorising its own understandings of values, truth, and justice. The secular vision of the public good comes to exercise sovereignty over public life. The current suggestion by President Sarkozy to ban the niqab in order to preserve

secular values in the public sphere in France is a striking example.

But the secularised public realm has not only become confessional, it has become covertly confessional, claiming neutrality. The open discussion of the religious motivations of politicians, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish and so on, is foreclosed. But so is the open discussion of its own confessionally ‘secular’ values. Far from providing a neutral space for open debate, a secularised public realm precludes debate about religious confessions as they affect political policy, preventing public accountability. Thus Tony Blair has reported feeling forced to downplay his faith while in power because of scepticism in Britain towards politicians who are actively religious⁴⁹. He is no exception. It is reported of Harold Wilson that, after writing a speech, he would systematically remove the biblical inflexions before delivering it⁵⁰. In neither case did this prevent the politician’s confessional identity from influencing their policies; but it did prevent the open discussion of these influences and thus weakened public accountability. In democracies, the debate and challenge of political principles is essential to holding those with power publicly accountable. The foreclosing of such debate has serious implications, leaving only ‘speechless collision’⁵¹.

As a result of identifying the public and the secular, religion becomes squeezed into the private sphere, and religious groups come to feel illegitimate ‘doing God’ in public, except perhaps on very narrow ‘moral’ issues, which may easily be characterised as peculiar to religion, and therefore safe for mainstream politics to ignore. Religion becomes ‘a hobby’, and serious religious engagement in the public sphere is trivialised. Stephen Carter characterises the resultant form of ‘secularity’ as a ‘culture of disbelief’ which imposes a ‘rhetoric that refuses to accept the notion that rational, public-spirited people can take religion seriously’⁵². Faith is widely regarded as an ‘archaic relic’ which should perhaps be preserved for its heritage value, but obviously has nothing to contribute to public debate⁵³.

The relegation of religion to private belief leaves the field open for confessionally secular values to dominate the public sphere in the guise of neutrality. Ratzinger has spoken of the belief in ‘progress’ and ‘political messianism’ as secular substitutes for belief in God⁵⁴. Carter refers to this as ‘the religion of secularism’ which has successfully excluded other religions from the public sphere, claiming sovereignty for the “secular” voice. Its

first commandment is that the public sphere must declare Secular Values: Thou shalt not put God before the State⁵⁵. Putting God first, or indeed mentioning him at all, represents a claim to an alternative source of authority and risks undermining secularism. This secular elevation of the state is religion by another name, and its claim to sovereignty is idolatry. From the perspective of the prophetic Christian vision underlying democratic states, preserving the possibility of putting God first is precisely the function of the liberties which the state exists to guarantee⁵⁶. The Christian foundation for democratic liberty was precisely freedom of conscience, the liberty to put conscience above state regulation, the liberty to worship the true God and to reject idols⁵⁷. The 'secular' sphere should exist, not to promote its own vision of life to the exclusion of all others, but to guarantee a neutral, bounded space within which a variety of confessions can be debated.

The resurgence of Islam has recently flushed the intolerant nature of religious 'secularism' out into the open in surprisingly explicit ways. The playwright David Edgar is in a good position to judge that 'no-one on the progressive liberal left can be comfortable with any of the religions of the book....'⁵⁸. More specifically, in June 2008 the Home Secretary announced a well funded 'de-

radicalisation programme' which includes policies aimed at Muslim theology. It proposes that the government should identify elements of theology which it regards as 'distorted', and selectively 'reinforce faith understanding'. The state is here using its power to regulate what citizens may *believe*, as well as what they may do. It authorises interventions if it feels that *beliefs* (not actions) are contrary to its own secular

Ultimately, the secular itself becomes confessional, a religious domain authorising its own understandings of values, truth, and justice.

values – beliefs which currently focus on Islam, but which could in the future extend to other religious confessions which fall out of favour⁵⁹. This policy is said to rely upon citizens 'working together and building on our shared values...', values whose precise nature it has become increasingly difficult to tie down.

At the extreme of this 'religion of secularism' is the essentially religious reaction of the New Atheism, with its doctrinaire and self imposed ignorance of Christian scholarship⁶⁰. Four days after 9-11, its 'high priest', Richard Dawkins, wrote in *The Guardian*: 'To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used.' Such intemperate and clumsy hyperbole did nothing to cool a climate of prejudice

which, within days, saw the "de-commissioning" of several religious-looking Asian people on the streets of Britain by secular thugs.

Michael Northcott, following Stanley Hauerwas, argues that exclusively secular values are 'dangerous' to the extent that they are believed to be universal, 'that all reasonable people ought to believe them and that therefore those who oppose them are unreasonable, even deranged.' Habermas makes a similar point when he argues that a state guarantee of 'the same ethical freedom to every citizen... is incompatible with the political universalisation of a secularist world view. When secularised citizens act as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates'⁶¹. Authentic public neutrality requires plural confessional inclusion.

It is clear that many New Atheists believe their values to be universal in Habermas' sense; indeed, most liberal secularists take this as given. The extent to which it then appears reasonable to impose these values on others varies. The Home Secretary's 2008 proposal authorises the use of state power to regulate belief. The French government proposes to regulate dress. The more militant regard the religious education of children as amounting to child abuse which the state has a duty to prevent; indeed, this once marginal view is rapidly gaining credence⁶². On the international stage, we have recently seen liberal democracy regarded as so unquestionably a universal good that the West can justifiably wage war to establish it in benighted dictatorships. Northcott sees this as a 'consequence of Enlightenment rationalism... The universal story of an enlightened humanity progressing towards peace legitimates a perpetual war to bring it about'⁶³.

Modern secular humanism isn't what remains after religion is stripped away by science; rather it is socially imagined as a public substitute for religion, itself bearing the marks of religion⁶⁴. Religion has not died out; rather secularism has become another religion, vying for the attention of citizens, imposing its beliefs - covertly if possible but through the use of power if necessary. We disturb a settled idolatry at our peril, and secular religion, prodded by the resurgence of 'faith', is reacting.

Speaking "secular"

A consequence of these unwritten rules is that, to enter public debate, religions have to translate their faith into the creed of secularism; they have to make it ostensibly profane. The distinctively "religious" is anathema, and is excluded as irrational and dogmatic before we begin. A recent example of this occurred during a BBC interview with Cormac Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor.

John Humphrys put it to the Cardinal that there is a popular secular demand that ‘people like you should avoid using religious language... find a way of putting it which is more acceptable to secular society.’⁶⁵ Ironically Humphrys remarked in the same interview that it was ‘hard to see in what sense you are being excluded from public debate’, asserting that ‘nobody wants to deny you a public platform any more than [they wish to deny one to] football managers’. So long as Catholics don’t claim any other authority than that of football managers, they may speak. But the essence of religion is precisely an appeal to an authority even higher than that of soccer. Secularism recognises as legitimate in the public sphere only those religious discourses made in its own image, and so it talks only to an image devoted to itself, and to which it is exclusively committed. The secular world worships and serves itself as its very own idol; it worships itself in self-idolatry⁶⁶.

While secularism demands that religion adopt a secular perspective, it makes no attempt to accommodate itself to religious understandings. Indeed, New Atheists such as Dawkins make a virtue out of their ignorance of Christian scholarship. The secular mind finds this asymmetry congenial, but thereby loses the possibility of learning from religion. It is left with the language of scientific rationalism, market competition or financial advantage⁶⁷. If the family is under debate, the Humphrys doctrine requires Catholics to speak, say, of the social impact of single parent households, or the consequences for children of their parents’ separation. Now such factors may or may not be important, but none of them are distinctively Christian or Catholic. But to speak in more authentically Christian terms such as commitment, faithfulness, or a covenant fidelity required by God would not be ‘acceptable to secular society’. If the anti-slavery movement had been forbidden the ‘religious’ insight that all people are made in the image of God, or Martin Luther King had relied on a management plan rather than a dream about ‘all God’s children’, it might have been more acceptable to the then prevailing culture, but it would not have been prophetic. Barack Obama cites Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address to illustrate the centrality of religious

New Atheists such as Dawkins make a virtue out of their ignorance of Christian scholarship.

Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice⁶⁸. This is not peculiar to Christianity. Other religions are also required to transform their

language into secular religion to gain a hearing. Understandably, some are not prepared to do so, and are forced into ‘speechless collision’.

This asymmetry reinforces the ‘religion of secularism’, even as it excludes prophetic religion from the public sphere. But what is radical and transformative in Christianity is precisely that which resists translation into profane language, and therein lies the paradox of secularism. If prophetic Christianity is required for the revitalising of Western democracies, secularism, by insisting on its exclusive sovereignty in the public sphere, increases the risk that modern democracy will come off the rails. The strategy of exclusion was intended to emasculate religion, but paradoxically has depleted the publicly available resources needed to protect democratic ideals.

Secular self-emasculation and intolerance

But there is a further twist to the spiral. The ‘religion of secularism’ is an oppression eating away at the heart of democratic liberalism itself. For the ‘exclusion of religion’ undermines a basic assumption of democracy inherited from prophetic Christianity: that differing truth claims are entitled to equality of expression. This equality is a precondition for citizens to demand of one another an account for their political views. Communities integrated by this mutually binding demand for tolerance have some protection against segmenting ‘along the dividing lines of competing world views’⁶⁹. But this requires that religious discourse in the public sphere is not discounted before we begin. It requires the public sphere to be authentically neutral in the sense of providing a forum for contesting confessional identities.

The exclusion of religious identities has recently extended to the suppression of all public signifiers of religious difference. For example, where Western democracies once prided themselves on respecting minorities, recent years have seen the suppression of even essentially harmless markers of religion in the public sphere. An obvious example is the debate in several European countries over Muslim head covering which is treated as an alien threat to the prevailing cultural norm of the public exposure of the female body. One British politician has declared that he has difficulty communicating with a veiled woman because he cannot see her face, although he is presumably able to use a telephone⁷⁰. Many Muslim women argue that hijab is, on the contrary, a source of positive values of modesty, privacy, and protection from the male gaze. This secular intolerance is not restricted to the markers of Islam, as is shown by the recent cases of Christians Nadia Eweida, who was forbidden to wear a visible cross at work by her employer, and Lillian Ladele, who was disciplined for declining to officiate at civil partnership ceremonies; the Sikh Sarika Watkins-Singh who was

excluded from school for nine months for wearing a kara; the Christian BMI Stewardess banned from taking her own personal Bible on flights to Saudi Arabia (BMI claimed to be following British Foreign Office advice); and the nurse, Caroline Petrie, who was suspended for offering to pray for a patient's recover⁷¹. The consequences of such intolerance can be grave for the individuals concerned. For example, Faiza M has lived in France for eight years, has a French husband and three French children; she wears hijab and seeks to be a traditional Muslim wife. The Conseil d'Etat (France's highest court) has refused to grant her citizenship, ruling that she 'has no concept of *laïcité*' and her religious practices are 'incompatible with essential values of the French community'.⁷²

Keith Porteous Wood, the executive director of The National Secular Society, commented on Sarika Watkins-Singh's case that to allow the wearing of the kara 'may well encourage those activists who have been trying to force their religious practices and symbols into schools and workplaces'. The columnist Deborah Orr was horrified at the thought that religious criteria should be taken seriously in the public realm. What about Muslims who might demand 'the right in supermarkets to refuse to handle alcohol or pork'.

This refusal to grant validity to religious speech represents a failure of secularism's own canons of rationality.

She considers that Muslims should simply not work in supermarkets if they are unwilling to do this. Yet why should anyone, whether Muslim, Jew, vegetarian or merely a Christian appalled at animal cruelty, have to handle pork? Surely supermarkets are able to accommodate this, just as administrators can provide a service for civil partnerships by allocating this duty to

other registrars. Diversity, it seems, has limits for the liberal conscience. 'The last thing we need is for the idea that ill-considered [in Orr's opinion] religious prejudices [in Orr's opinion] can trump the law'. If a view differs from the secular consensus, it is 'ill-considered' and 'prejudiced', and should not be entertained. Where would this have left the abolitionists or the civil rights movement?⁷³

As Stephen Carter observes, '... it is in the nature of the religious citizen to try to form a community that will project into the future an understanding of the world that may be quite different from that of the sovereign majority of one's fellow citizens'. But if those citizens are intolerant of religious understandings, the question of civil dissent may become increasingly important both for religious communities themselves and for the health of modern democracies. Carter argues that democracies

need dissent 'both to blunt the power of the sovereign and to help us to move forward.' If so, this may make the issue of dissent especially acute for religious citizens who desire to serve only one master⁷⁴.

The exclusion of religious identities is not limited to individual markers. It can also be felt at an institutional level. The most obvious example is the debate over 'Faith Schools'. Unsurprisingly, the National Secular Society campaigns for their abolition, but opposition is not limited to fringe organisations. The NUT General Secretary has proposed incorporating plural religious education into the curriculum in order to bring it under secular control and 'reduce the demand for faith schools'. A call for faith schools to be abolished failed to find time for debate at the 2008 NUT conference although it was widely expected to pass had it been heard⁷⁵. Polly Toynbee regards faith schools as 'among the most indelibly damaging of Tony Blair's social legacies', observing that 'the state can't protect children from pernicious views and doctrines at home – but it has a duty to protect them in state schools'⁷⁶. Faith schools are not alone. Any religiously qualified organisation, from University Christian Unions to Hospital Chaplains, is likely to face challenge⁷⁷.

Secular Liberalism, divorced from its Christian roots, is 'intrinsically self-contradictory' because it represses and devalues the free speech of religious citizens, and demands of them 'an effort to learn and adapt that secular citizens are spared having to make'⁷⁸. This refusal to grant validity to religious speech represents a failure of secularism's own canons of rationality. It also prejudices the access of secular democracy to the very resources needed to sustain itself. Habermas, puts this surprisingly strongly when he says that, given the risks arising from the exclusion of norms, values and mutual understanding by market mechanisms and the power of bureaucracy, 'it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural [religious] sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity'⁷⁹.

If so, the New Atheism is not simply harmless rhetoric. For, if a religion provides a potentially nourishing cultural resource as Habermas suggests, then attempts to silence it in the public domain undermine the resilience of democracy in the West. Moreover, as we have seen, the exclusion of religious discourse from the public sphere also makes it impossible to hold to account politicians whose policies may, in part, be inspired by religious motivations, including those of secular religion. By taking religious debate seriously, political stances can be challenged and changed. It is reported that Bono talked Senator Jesse Helms out of his entrenched view on HIV/AIDS by drawing on their shared Christian beliefs. Helms went on to positively influence legislative change⁸⁰. Similarly, the Christian and former president of the Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change, John Houghton, has influenced many evangelical leaders in the US towards a more nuanced view of global warming.

Requirement for openness

Without the public legitimisation of religion, there can be no public confessional dialogue with the secular; and without dialogue we have only the 'speechless collision of worlds'⁸¹. The secularised state battens down the hatches, increases policing and surveillance, strengthens the secret state, restricts civil liberties - and undermines its own integrity. Public figures have recently queued up to express concern about the erosion of liberties we once thought inalienable. The former shadow Home Secretary David Davis, ex MI5 director-general Stella Rimington, and former Chief Constable Lord Dear among others have joined the usual suspects from organisations such as Liberty in making outspoken criticisms⁸². Former Lord Chief Justice Woolf has called the recent erosion of civil liberties 'one of the most significant changes in the life of the nation since the end of the second world war.'⁸³ The 2009 International Commission of Jurists Report observed that 'the framework of international law is being undermined... and the US and UK have led that undermining'.

It is in the interests of democracy to keep the public forum open for debate between all citizens, whether of traditional or secular faith. This requires the abandonment of an exclusive and dogmatic 'religion of secularism' in favour of all religious viewpoints having equal entitlement to expression. That would only occur if the majority of citizens recognised the possible cogency of such contributions. Such recognition presupposes 'a mentality that is anything but a matter of course in the secularised societies of the West'⁸⁴ There is a long way to go before public access to religious resources becomes possible, but the path is not entirely closed.

The Golden Rule

Secular prophets regard themselves as harbingers of the future, and religion as the carrier of a stultifying tradition. But the baton of stultifying tradition long ago passed to the secular prophets; it is free-thinking religious discourse that refuses to accede to the authority of the secular status quo. Religious groups 'provide leaven and leverage for the polity to improve'⁸⁵. But the ability of religion to sustain its democratic legacy depends on its authentically prophetic nature.

It is clear that not all religions are able to contribute to this enterprise. For example, the secular strategy of religious privatisation has generated a smorgasbord of do-it-yourself spiritualities, as many as there are spirits. These are too individualised to be publicly accountable. Similarly, a mere claim to religiosity is insufficient. German Fascism drew on a revitalised paganism, which

subverted rather than nourishing democratic polity. Eli Echols has suggested that all contributions in the public sphere must subscribe to the Golden Rule - 'love your neighbour as yourself'⁸⁶. This is, admittedly, a religious requirement; but as Western humanists brought up within a Judaeo-Christian background have widely adopted a secularised version as their own, it is probably one that most would accept.

The return of religion to the public sphere is inevitably selective: only those religions which have retained a genuinely communal nature and which conform to the Golden Rule are eligible to re-enter public debate. In Britain this includes the three Abrahamic faiths⁸⁷. In a diverse public sphere, all contending religions, including the 'religion of secularism', would be obliged to defend and justify their political opinions. And in this dialogue, truth will out. Idols are powerless, but the true God is faithful to his covenant, and history provides many examples of small groups of faithful Christians having a disproportionate impact on their times. Prophetic Christianity discloses reality and is recognised by its fruit.

Moralistic or prophetic?

Now, of course, religious contributions to public debate should seek to be lucid and rational. But it is intrinsic to religion that the meaning of the world cannot be found within material boundaries or rational syllogisms. Human beings are not equivalent to brain chemistry, nor justice reducible to pragmatic compromise. What, then, is at the centre of religion?

There is a widespread perception that the essence of religion is morality. Faced with social change, a well-worn response is to appeal to a recovery of once salty values: a moral revival. This is usually inspired by its sister 'moral panic'. But moral values can be tricky things.

In 1993, John Major re-launched his administration with a 'Back to Basics' speech. Journalists soon asked whether this meant morality, and although Major was rather coy about it himself, the media quickly identified 'basics' as the Christian values of family and personal morality. Sadly, moral scandals within his own administration lay just beneath the surface, and so he made shipwreck on the reef of human frailty. Wise politicians have since preferred the vox pop focus group to moral exhortation.

Now it may be that a reminder of moral values has some force in a hedonistically inclined culture. Richard Layard, the government's 'happiness tsar', is religiously agnostic, but recognises 'that those with religious

Prophetic
Christianity
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beliefs tend to be happier'. He regrets a 'failure to develop a secular morality. People find it hard to talk about moral issues. A moral vocabulary is what is lacking for many children'⁸⁸. But a moral vocabulary is not simply lacking, it is often seen as an oppressive tool of traditional authority. Ratzinger astutely observes that in trying to avoid one form of oppression, this strategy falls into another: 'many perceive moral obligation as freedom's prison; but long ago Durkheim pointed out that it is rationalization, not ethics, which constructs the most constricting iron cage... If we step outside of the language of obligation and responsibility, we step not into freedom but into the machine shop of facts where humans may be engineered by he (sic) who wields the hammer. To speak the language of obligation is to use the syntax of freedom'⁸⁹.

Many religions may provide such a language of obligation. In the public mind, Islam is currently associated with violence, but its longer term importance in Britain may draw more on its moralism, as the *Metro* cartoon suggests. Indeed, there is already some evidence that Islam is having a positive effect upon English drinking culture⁹⁰. But although moralism may conserve, repress or even restore, it cannot transform. It is not the prophetic Christianity which formed Western democracies in the first place. To mistake the two, risks decorating a secular agenda with moral ornament⁹¹.

Habermas' recognition of the ethical force of Christianity is certainly welcome: 'For me, the basic concepts of philosophical ethics... fail to capture all the intuitions that have already found a more nuanced expression in the language of the Bible...' However, he approaches a more authentic Christian vision when he argues: 'I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, persons and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation'. There are, he says, elements in 'sacred scriptures and religious traditions' which have been 'lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone'. These elements make a 'functional contribution... to the reproduction of motivations and attitudes that are socially desirable'. They include 'intuitions about error and redemption, about the salvific exodus from a life that is experienced as empty of salvation'. The ambiguity in these carefully crafted remarks is reminiscent of Marx's definition of religion as the 'heart of a heartless world and soul of a soulless condition'. It is unclear whether either analysis reaches beyond human flourishing. But whether we are to infer the transcendence of religion or not, Habermas clearly recognises that it has an irreducible meaning, a 'semantic potential [which] could one day become

inaccessible' unless it finds a place within public discourse⁹².

Whilst Habermas' discussion is closer to an authentic Christian vision than mere moralism can reach, we should nevertheless make the distinction between the two plain. For Habermas, religion is a fundamental feature of human experience which can function as a semantic resource for a moribund secularism; it remains unclear, at least to me, whether he regards it as having a transcendent referent. For a Christian, the biblical revelation is firstly truth and reality, not simply an ethical intuition or a form of human experience⁹³.

Authentic Christianity is never merely ethical, nor is it pragmatic calculation intended to revitalise democracy. It points us, not towards the impoverished realities of moralism, but the redemption declared in Jesus Christ; not to vanity of language but to fullness of reality; not to instrumental repair but to the restoration of all things. Mother Teresa notoriously accounted for her behaviour in terms of serving Jesus rather than helping the poor. Yet her service of the poor gained in integrity for it.

Authentic Christianity is prophetic, and cannot be tamed to political service. It is subject to the Kingdom government of Christ in what Alan Storkey calls 'resurrection politics'⁹⁴. It entails faith, hope, love, truth, justice and service. It brings something from beyond secular politics to transform the terms of debate. Martin Luther King had a 'dream', and a dream is neither pragmatism nor moralism. It transcended the then orthodox consensus about race, about justice, even about secular law⁹⁵. Similarly the anti-slavery movement rejected the ancient Greek classification of slaves as 'living tools' which had been widely adopted in the West since the Renaissance. In its place, abolitionists embraced the Christian doctrine that all human beings are made in the image of God. This is the very dimension of religion that the Humphrys doctrine would exclude from the public sphere.

Authentic Christianity is prophetic, and cannot be tamed to political service.

Prophetic Christianity, as a repository of transcendence, of otherness, has an essential role in sustaining democratic freedoms. The virtues of truth, love and *koinonia* offset the search for worldly success, providing an alternative vision to the global icons of competitiveness and consumption. It aspires to a 'transformation which goes beyond human flourishing', and offers new conceptions of "the good life" and of public service⁹⁶. A poster for the Alpha Course showed people on the modern treadmill and asked rhetorically: 'Is there more to life than this?'

Local initiatives

I have suggested that the dominance of ‘the religion of secularism’ in the public sphere holds out little prospect for the equality of expression of religious truth claims. However, Western democracies permit local expressions of religion, even if these are often driven by pragmatic and financial considerations. Both main political parties are aware of the potential. In May 2008, Gordon Brown met eighty church leaders at No 10, and recognised the Christian contributions to social life at the communal, national and global levels. David Willetts MP has observed that ‘all the evidence is that the people who voluntarily give their time and wisdom and experience to the community... are very likely to have some religious belief’⁹⁷. It is estimated that charitable work by Church of England volunteers – in job-creation projects, urban regeneration programmes, eco-initiatives, youth clubs, projects with the homeless, the bereaved, and asylum seekers – saves Britain hundreds of millions of pounds annually. Home Office statistics show regular churchgoers are 48% more likely to do such work than their secular counterparts⁹⁸.

As a result, state agencies are forging alliances with faith communities to provide public services. Faith schools have proved able to sustain an ethos which values individuals, even in difficult circumstances. In social welfare, state partnerships with faith-based organisations provide a ‘charitable choice’ which would otherwise be too expensive for the state to fund. For example, churches have been running clubs for children and young people for many years, and there is a growing recognition that these provide a valuable community resource. Street Pastors, church drop-in centres, and community renewal projects such as Message to Manchester or Hope 08, all subvert the hegemony of ‘secular religion’. Nims Obunge, the chief executive of the Haringay Peace Alliance, sees such partnerships as essential for community change: ‘The church is the largest voluntary provider of services to the black community and its role in crime prevention must be recognised and supported. Through initiatives such as street pastors and our regular Sunday schools and youth clubs, many young people have been given alternative choices to a life of violence. The government needs to support faith organisations providing vital services for parents and young people’⁹⁹.

There remain areas of conflict, as both sides recognise. Some Churches are doubtful about joint projects, fearing that their evangelistic hands will be tied. There is also secular suspicion, with some evidence that faith groups are being discriminated against in funding decisions for fear of their proselytising. Indeed, Hazel Blears, when still Communities Minister, announced her intention to introduce a ‘charter of excellence’ which would prevent proselytising. Faith-based

community representatives have expressed concern that preventing people from talking about their faith will threaten their continued participation¹⁰⁰. Meanwhile, the New Atheists decry any interaction between religion and politics, and actively oppose Christian initiatives. But, then, few members of the National Secular Society run Youth Clubs.

There is also room for distinctively Christian insights in social and political policy on the wider stage. In the early twentieth century, Police Court Missions introduced the principle of “grace” into the British legal system to provide a “probationary” alternative to punitive sentencing. Although subsequent legislation has excluded grace-full options, their initiative showed the way for Christian contributions to policy reforms. Following their example, a forgiving education system would provide a second, even a seventh, chance; a merciful health system would not deport dying a Ghanaian woman to certain death;¹⁰¹ an hospitable immigration service would not treat asylum seekers as criminals¹⁰².

In recent years a number of Christian initiatives have pioneered distinctive policies which may both provide salt in themselves, and open the way for a more tolerant public acceptance of religious debate. For example, the Relationships Foundation has emphasised that social institutions have a ‘relational’ aspect which values individuals as ends rather than means. The 2008 ‘Faith in the Future’ cross party Committee report proposed policy tests of relational and communal responsibility. The John Ray Initiative draws on Christian insights to formulate environmental policy. The Evangelical Alliance appointed a Public Policy Director in 2005. It would not be the first time that democratic renewal based on Christian truth lay in the hands of a few small groups doing ‘prophetic Church’.

Of particular interest is the role of Christian initiatives in providing a neutral space within which confessional differences (both ‘religious’ and ‘secular’) can be debated and peaceable resolutions sought. Bono’s intervention with Senator Helms, and the Haringay Peace Alliance are individual and local community examples respectively. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a well known national example. Less well known are the international peace-building efforts of Jimmy Carter.

Carter states his ‘conviction that religion can be significant for peacemaking’, giving the example of himself, Menachem Begin and Anwar el-Sadat at Camp

The future for
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David in 1978 where the negotiations were 'greatly influenced by our religious backgrounds.' 'Each of the principals at Camp David recognized peace to be both a gift from God and a preeminent human obligation.' Similarly, in Zambia in 1991, the neutral space for debate became a literal space as the principals met in the Anglican cathedral in Lusaka and began with shared prayer. The subsequent political resolution led to the redrafting of the constitution and opened the way for elections. 'The churches carried the trust of the Zambian people and made a decisive contribution to the re-establishment of democracy.' Carter argues that religion is of 'growing importance' for peacemaking.¹⁰³

I have pointed to examples where the gospel can bring transformation, but there is another possibility. It may be that the secular world will reassert itself, and these local opportunities will be closed down as the New Atheists wish. If so, Western democratic institutions will be further denied access to the resources necessary for renewal. We will be left with modernist materialism, 'postmodern chatter' or moralistic fundamentalism (whether Liberal, Christian or Islamic). But the world is larger than the West. Philip Jenkins argues that the future of the Christian Church lies with its meteoric expansion in Africa, Asia and South America¹⁰⁴. Christian influence has already been claimed as a stimulus to democratisation in China through grassroots reform, as well as in several African countries¹⁰⁵. The future for Western democracy could lie in the hands of our Southern and Eastern sisters and brothers.

⁴⁷Op cit p140

⁴⁸Eder op cit

⁴⁹Independent 4.4.08 p6

⁵⁰O'Donovan (1999) 'The Desire of the Nations' p9 - inflexions doubtless acquired both from the Bible and from singing the hymns of his fellow Congregationalist Isaac Watts

⁵¹The phrase is Habermas'

⁵²Carter (1993) 'Culture of Disbelief' p6

⁵³Habermas (2006) 'Religion in the Public Sphere' European Journal of Philosophy 14:1 p15

⁵⁴http://www.law.nyu.edu/clppr/program2006/readings/Habermas_Religion.pdf accessed 26.5.08

⁵⁵J Ratzinger (1994) 'A Turning Point for Europe' p125. He is speaking of Marxism, but the point applies more generally.

⁵⁶The phrase is Carter's

⁵⁷Carter 'God's Name in vain' p4. See also 'Culture of Disbelief'

⁵⁸See Carter (1995) 'The Dissent of the Governed' p105ff

⁵⁹<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/19/theatre.david.mamet> accessed 8.03.09 p6

⁶⁰Guardian 3.6.08 p1/2

⁶¹T Eagleton <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eag01.html> accessed 14.5.08

⁶²J Habermas and J Ratzinger (2005) 'Dialectics of Secularisation' p50

⁶³I first noted the allegation of child abuse among a few authors in 2000 (Sampson op cit p154), but it has since become widespread. See, for example, Christopher Hitchens (2007) 'God is Not Great' ch 16; A C Grayling (2007) 'Against all Gods' p26

& (2006) 'The Form of Things' p112. That such views have entered popular debate is seen in the letter from the teacher Helena Cox to The Independent 18.3.09, in which she compares religiously motivated home-education with child abuse. For a measured discussion, see A McGrath (2007) 'The Dawkins Delusion' p3f.

⁶⁴Michael Northcott (2004) 'An Angel Directs the Storm' p40/41

⁶⁵Taylor 'A Secular Age' p27

⁶⁶Radio 4 Today programme 9.5.08.

⁶⁷See J - L Marion (2002) *Prolegomena to Charity*

⁶⁸Habermas (2001) op cit

⁶⁹Obama (2006) p214. His speech 'A New Beginning' given in Cairo 4.6.09 similarly cites religious texts to access the self-understanding of Muslims, Christians and Jews respectively, while making clear his own Christian commitment.

⁷⁰Habermas (2006) p13. Habermas' recent texts first drew my attention to this consequence of exclusion.

⁷¹Jack Straw

⁷²http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5410472.stm accessed 26.5.08. See Hackett p679

⁷³http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/north_yorkshire/6166746.stm accessed 26.5.08, The Independent 12.7.08 p16, The Independent 30.7.08 p8, Telegraph 20.12.06,

⁷⁴<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7863699.stm> accessed 29.6.09

⁷⁵The Independent 12.7.08 p32

⁷⁶The Independent 12.7.08 p16

⁷⁷Stephen L Carter (1995) 'The Dissent of the Governed' p141-2. Note Carter distinguishes between 'dissent' and 'dis-allegiance'

⁷⁸news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7311178.stm

⁷⁹Guardian 2.9.08 p31

⁸⁰<http://www.secularism.org.uk/religious-demands-costing-nhs-ov.html> accessed 22.4.09. The recent cases involving Christian

⁸¹Unions are well known. Following several recent examples such as Caroline Petrie's, the 2009 BMA conference is due to debate the right of medical staff to pray for their patients without fear of disciplinary action. Current NHS guidelines offer little reassurance.

⁸²Habermas (2006) p13

⁸³Habermas and Ratzinger p46

⁸⁴<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/from-alister-to-aid-worker-does-celebrity-diplomacy-really-work-1365946.html> accessed 18.01.09

⁸⁵Habermas (2001)

⁸⁶See also the Liberty website, and The Home Affairs Committee report 'A Surveillance Society' 5.6.08.

⁸⁷Guardian Report 6.2.09

⁸⁸Habermas (2006) p15

⁸⁹John Witte (2004) 'Public Religion' First Things

⁹⁰http://www.firstthings.com/article.php?id_article=314 accessed 26.5.08 Note that Witte intends 'leaven' in a positive sense.

⁹¹Lev 18.19 & 34, Matt 7.12, Luke 6.27-36 & 10.25-28. Echols (2003) 'Defining Religion for Constitutional purposes' Boston University Public Interest Law J 117 120-23. Interestingly, Obama 4.9.09 did likewise.

⁹²For Islam see S83.1-4; S59.9

⁹³Guardian G2 24.6.08 p15

⁹⁴Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (1994) 'A Turning Point for Europe?' p36f

⁹⁵<http://education.guardian.co.uk/students/news/story/0,,2283381,00.html> which partially attributes some recent reductions in alcohol consumption in Britain among university students to the growing population of minority ethnic and religious groups on campus. accessed 21.7.08

⁹⁶Philip Jenkins p185

⁹²'Reason and Rationality' p162; 'Post-metaphysical Thinking' (1992) Polity p15; Habermas and Ratzinger p43 & 46. A similarly ambiguous point is made by Eagleton op cit p113 when he speaks of religion being concerned with the 'nature and destiny of humanity itself', which alone can generate aspirations leading to a 'radical transformation of what we say and do'. Casanova appears to grant religious transcendence but also speaks of the need for religion to incorporate 'as its own the central aspects of the Enlightenment critique of religion' in order to play a 'positive' role in 'the revitalization of the modern public sphere' (op cit p233).

⁹³Ratzinger is especially sensitive to the limits of moralism and instrumentality - Habermas & Ratzinger (2005)

⁹⁴A Storkey (2005) 'Jesus and Politics' Baker Grand Rapids ch 13

⁹⁵We should recall that King was imprisoned for breaking the law of the US on account of a higher law, leading to his famous Letter from Prison. This reminds us of the cost of the dissent discussed above.

⁹⁶Charles Taylor (2007) 'A Secular Age' p510

⁹⁷Third way Summer 2007 p20

⁹⁸Independent 5.7.08 p28

⁹⁹http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article1400870.ece accessed 14.6.09

¹⁰⁰<http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/third-sector-effective-partnerships.pdf> p22 section 3.3. Accessed 10.3.09. Speech at Evangelical Alliance Conference 5.2.09

¹⁰¹On 9 January 2008 Ama Sumani, suffering from cancer, was taken from her bed at the University Hospital of Wales for deportation to Ghana despite the fact that she would be unable to afford treatment in Accra. She died there two months later. The Archbishops of Wales and Canterbury criticised her deportation as inhumane and unjust <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7306345.stm> accessed 21.5.08

¹⁰²Nazir-Ali op cit. One might imagine the reaction of British immigration officials to an unknown carpenter and his wife claiming asylum on the ground that the ruler of their native land considered their infant son a threat to his authority.

¹⁰³Forward in Johnson & Sampson op cit Pvi-vii

¹⁰⁴Philip Jenkins (2007) 'The Next Christendom' OUP

¹⁰⁵<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/IH07Ad03.html> Asia Times 7.8.07 - accessed 21.5.08. Paul Gifford (ed) (1995) 'The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa'