

Religion in the Public Sphere

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You have asked me to say something about religion in the public sphere, partly from my perspective as a Christian priest working now as an elected Police and Crime Commissioner, and partly from my academic interest in the sociology of religion. I'll begin with largely sociological comments around what I think has been happening to religion in recent years, since that is the essential background to what I want to say about religion in public life.

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We have an expression in English for something we should have seen but didn't because our focus was somewhere else: we say it was 'Hidden in plain sight'.

For most of my working life, in much of the west, religion has been hidden in plain sight. There has been an assumption that we live in a secularised and secularising world. As societies modernise, they become more rational, and this squeezes religious understandings of the world out of human minds and out of human society. Modernisation leads inevitably to the decline of religion.

This assumption is still widely held by those who shape public opinion – academics, public intellectuals, those working in journalism, the media and politics. So we notice what confirms that idea and don't notice what doesn't. In the the 1960s this was called 'secularisation theory' or the 'secularisation paradigm'. It purported to be both a description of what was happening and an explanation of it. And the churches in Europe bought into this narrative. In the face of what they thought was growing secularisation, they reacted with strategies of either rejection or adaptation.

Theologians who welcomed it, sought a radically new way of expressing Christianity in the light of it. Bonhoeffer had said that men and women had 'come of age' and were robust enough to live with the truth that God does not intervene in human affairs. Books were written, especially in the USA, embracing the secular with such titles as *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox (b.1929) and *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by Paul Van Buren (1924-98), both of which I read as an ordinand in the late 1960s. But other Christians resisted and asserted traditional, conservative forms of Christianity and ethics.

Either way, the theory of secularisation itself was not challenged. And that was a mistake, because it was not true. Other facts went unnoticed. They were hidden in plain sight, until eventually, a different account seemed more plausible.

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There were two aspects to that different account.

The first began in the United States. As a young priest I had been very influenced by the writings of the American sociologist Peter Berger. His book *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) was where I first met the theory of secularisation *as explanation*. But by the end of the 1990s he was saying that he got it wrong. He now spoke about the *De-secularization of the World*. He had come to believe that the theory of secularisation only worked in the European context. It was hardly a description of what was happening to religion in the USA where Christianity, especially in its evangelical and charismatic forms, was flourishing. But not just in America and not just Christianity.

Globally, all faiths were enjoying revival – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity was growing in places where it had never been before. The Muslim revival was also happening in Europe, though hidden in plain sight. No one took any real notice of the strength of religion among immigrant groups until a certain form of political Islam began to force itself into the public sphere and public consciousness from the late 1990s.

So the theory of secularisation needed extensive qualification. Modernisation has not led to the decline of religion in most of the world, and in so far as there is decline in Europe, it is mainly a white phenomenon. The religions of most of the ethnic minorities, particularly those who are Muslim, have resisted secularisation. And further east, in Russia, following the collapse of communism, secularisation has been reversed with a significant revival of Orthodox Christianity. As Peter Berger now put it, 'The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.' Moreover, the form of religion that is reviving or growing is the more conservative – the very type of religion that the proponents of secularisation theory might have expected to dwindle first.

It is possible, of course, that secularisation actually contributes to the more conservative religious revival. One effect of secularisation is to undermine older certainties, and that is uncomfortable. One appeal of conservative forms of religion is that they offer certainty.

But as well as this recognition that the secularisation paradigm fitted few places outside Europe, there was also a realisation on the part of a few sociologists that it was not a good description of what was happening in Europe either. In a myriad of ways, so-called secular Europe displayed its Christian origins – in a way that would be different from, say, a secular Confucian or Islamic world. In Charles Taylor's words, cultural templates have been laid down in both directly Christian and indirectly semi-secular forms as the base of western culture – though their origins are not always recognised.

What he had in mind were moral standpoints that are simply taken for granted: the dignity of human beings; disinterested concern for one's neighbour; the Reformation insistence on the value of ordinary life – work and family – and so on. But also those public occasions when religious references are more directly made: when roadside shrines are built at the site of a traffic collision and cards left that speak of angels or heaven or God; the vicarious functions of the churches when people want to celebrate a birth or mark a tragedy in the community.

The culture retains at some deeper level than the measurement of Sunday attendances can show, a memory of the transcendent that could be called into service as and when required.

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Let me now turn to what I believe is a more accurate account of religion in modern societies.

We are learning to recognise two things.

First, modern, western societies are better understood as plural rather than secular - and becoming ever more plural. Older religious dogmas around issues such as contraception, abortion, divorce, re-marriage, homosexuality, same sex relations, physician assisted suicide - have given way to a plurality of moral positions, and the law has often struggled to keep up. At the same time immigration brought different religions to Europe and America in significant numbers. It is this plurality that the modern state has to reckon with.

Then second, in thinking about modern societies, we need to distinguish between the secular *state* and a secular *society*. Western states are secular – in a sense I'll come to - but their societies are plural.

As a result of different and often painful histories – including revolution and civil war - western nations have come to understand that the way a plural society can hold together is through the state being secular – through having what I call ground rules which enable individuals and groups, who are ethnically different or who hold different religions, philosophies and values, to live as neighbours as long as they acquiesce in them.

These ground rules include: democratic forms of government; the rule of law; equality before the law; freedom of religion and assembly; freedom of the press; mutual respect and tolerance and fair treatment of minorities.

These ground rules privilege no ethnic group, no church, no political ideology – though they do seek to protect the individual against the pressure of the collective – be that family, church, social class or the state itself. In that sense, modern states are, and need to be, secular. This privileging of the individual, incidentally, is part of that Christian inheritance, a fruit of the Reformation, specifically the seventeenth century Protestants who finally overcame theocracy.

Nevertheless, even in the secular state, religion can be accommodated in the public sphere. This takes different forms in different countries as a result of those different histories. And here we might notice how appearances can be deceptive.

One of the universities I taught in had an exchange programme for undergraduates. British students went to the United States and American students came here. The American students thought they were coming to a religious society, a religious culture. Why? Because there was an established church with the Queen as its supreme governor. Bishops of that church sat in the Upper House in Parliament. Religious education was taught by law in schools. Military chaplains were funded by the state. And so on. When the American students actually arrived here, they were shocked by just how secular British society was.

British students had that experience in reverse. They thought that the USA was a secular culture. Why? Because the constitution told them. Church and State were separated. Prayers could not be said in public schools. And so on. What they found when they went to America was a religious society. People went to church. Coins had 'In God we trust' on them. President Obama could lead the singing of *Amazing Grace* at a memorial service, President Trump could invoke the Almighty in an inauguration address and say 'God bless you' at the end of it – and mean it. It is inconceivable that any European political leader could or would want to do any of these things. The culture of Europe is in that respect more secular.

So secular states can have different constitutional arrangements and different cultures yet still accommodate religion in some form: it all turns on their histories.

The American constitution speaks about the separation of Church and State because it was born out of the struggle of different Protestant groups to deliver themselves not only out of the hands of the English king, but also the English church, by law established. It was not an attempt to bring about a secular culture but to prevent any one Christian church having power or privilege in the state. But it does not prevent a President referencing the Bible in his public oratory.

All this is very different from France where the commitment to laicite was born out of a revolution that was as much a rejection of a Church as it was a monarchy.

These different histories produce different responses to religion in the public sphere. So in this country, we decided as long ago as the 1950s that we could accommodate Sikhs wearing turbans as bus conductors in Wolverhampton, while the French, quite recently, have decided that forms of religious dress, such as the niqab or face veil, cannot be tolerated in the public sphere because it offends against that revolutionary principle of laicite.

And this brings me to what I think lies at the heart of the matter we are discussing.

What causes modern societies and their governments discomfort is not so much religion as pluralism. Religion is one component of a diverse society.

At one time, it was thought that a society would only hold together if everyone believed the same. This was one of the more dangerous legacies of mono-theism. One God, one church, one king, one morality. This is why emperors, popes and dictators sought to root out heresy, and disagreement and still do.

We know that diverse societies can hold together, if we *acquiesce in the basic ground rules*. It is this that makes a diverse society cohesive, not a commitment to common values.

In this country, in recent years, for instance, when some young Muslims became radicalised, governments of all political colours decided that we must counteract this by teaching British values in schools. A protracted debate began about what these were and whether Christianity was one of them. Something similar happened in Europe when the European Union flirted momentarily with the idea of a European constitution in 2004, and some wanted a reference to Christianity in that constitution – this was against the background of growing Muslim communities.

But this search for common values was to confuse what I called the ground rules we must all acquiesce in if we are to live together – democracy and the rule of law, etc - and values – whether religious or non-religious – that we will never entirely agree upon. So trying to suggest there were British values that all Britons had to agree upon was a self-defeating exercise. We are a diverse society – i.e. a multi-value as well as a multi-faith and multi non-religious-faith society.

One of the misleading assumptions of the secularisation theory was that once religion was banished, men and women would come to the same positions on, say, moral issues, because their reasoning would not be irrationally swayed by religious positions. But a moments reflection reveals it's not true. Even if religion were banished from the public sphere, other competing understandings of human life would fill the vacuum. Because whenever we act in the public sphere we act according to certain basic assumptions that we each frame our lives around. But there is no agreement between us as to what they should be.

So we cannot arrive at a public sphere free from disagreement, where rational debate gets us all to the same place: we are no more agreed on values than we are on religion. We agree on quite a lot of things. But not all; so we have to find a way of managing the points of disagreement, whether they are the result of religious or non-religious values and understandings of human life. We all bring our different understandings into the public sphere and collectively decide how we are going to handle disagreement.

Let me turn, finally, to the role of chaplains because I think that tells us a great deal about religion in the public sphere – and here I am mainly drawing on the British context..

Chaplains stand at the interface between organised religion and public institutions. In a recent collection of essays called *Chaplaincy Studies* I argue that it is possible to make the case for publicly funded chaplaincies (religious and non-religious) if it can be shown that those chaplaincies add value to the particular enterprise in which the chaplaincy operates, something that has to be argued and evidenced when funding for the public sector has been severely reduced following the financial crisis of 2008.

There are three obvious ways in which chaplaincy can add value.

First, pastoral. In my police force area, South Yorkshire, senior officers have

recently requested that I make a financial contribution to the voluntary chaplaincy so that chaplains, ordained and lay, can give more of their time. The Chief Constable believes that chaplains who get to know the 4,000 workforce are adding value as pastors and counsellors at a time when the force is under pressure and funding for occupational health care is not increasing.

Chaplains are especially welcomed when the police are struggling with difficult issues, such as the death of an officer on duty. Chaplains are assumed to know about death and bereavement and their pastoral skills are valued at moments such as this. My police force also recently asked the chaplaincy to arrange a memorial service later this year to remember officers who have died in the line of duty. Officers could have constructed something themselves, but chaplains are valued because they are seen as people who can put together a funeral or memorial service and, crucially, are trusted to do this in a way that is inclusive of all faiths and none.

Second, chaplains add value because they can enhance religious literacy. In recent years public bodies have found it impossible to ignore religion in the public sphere. In my area, the police have to deal on a daily basis with a number of different minority ethnic communities who are religious. They need to understand their religion and culture if they are to act sensitively towards them. They need to understand, for example, how to speak to or approach women, sensitivities around Ramadan, betrothal customs among Roma-Slovaks. Inter-faith groups, faith group leaders and chaplains have played important roles in ensuring that the police are religiously more literate. This has been especially welcomed by the police in the light of the government's counter-terrorism strategies and following a number of protests in our streets by far-right groups – all of which have led to community tensions. Religion is always going to be in the public sphere in these ways and the police value help in understanding.

The third way chaplaincies can add value is in their ability to be reflective around moral issues. This can happen at many levels. One senior British officer told me that at one time, when the army was involved in conflicts abroad, the chaplain was an afterthought. But during the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars which raised so many acute ethical and pastoral concerns, chaplains would be on the second plane out. It was clear how chaplains added value.

More generally, the Christian Church has made a massive contribution to the way war is thought about in our contemporary society. By recovering its own just war tradition at the time of the Vietnam war it gave the whole of society a moral discourse by which the actions of generals and politicians could be scrutinized. Just war principles are now everyone's starting point and have found their way into international law.

What religious people in a diverse society should generally not do, however, is attempt to make a contribution in the public sphere that begins by saying, 'God says', or 'Allah commands' – any more than those without a religious faith can say, 'Marx says', or 'Humanism teaches'. A moral position, certainly one that seeks to promote legislation, has to commend itself to the moral conscience of all citizens, whether religious or not, in a language in which all can participate.

But that should neither dismay nor surprise Christians. A consistent theme of the Biblical witness is that the non-believer can understand what has to be done, morally, because all human beings have a moral conscience. This is why wisdom literature does not say 'God says' but makes a direct appeal to the human conscience. It's why the prophet Amos can condemn the Edomites for pursuing their enemies with the sword but 'without pity'. It's why Jesus teaches in parables.

Having said that, there will always be those who can influence a diverse society even though they speak in the language of a religious faith. Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu or Mother Teresa.

All those who operate in the public sphere, of whatever faith or philosophy, religious

or non-religious, do so because they have some vision of what they think promotes the common good. Their motivation may be religious or non-religious. Either way, generally speaking, if they want to persuade others they must set out the case for that vision in language that anyone can understand.

So chaplains can add value and as a result they are valued.

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Let me end by noting something else, something in some ways more interesting and not a little curious.

Over the years, chaplaincies have done something quite remarkable, though hidden in plain sight. As a result of being at that interface between religion and the public sphere, they have contributed to the evolution of a form of spirituality that has become widely accepted in the plural society of the modern secular state. It's a form of spirituality that transcends denominational boundaries and perhaps religion itself. I'll call it chaplaincy spirituality.

So what is it?

From the 1960s many left the churches. Some, however, especially women, did not give up on religion; though what they sought they tended to call spirituality rather than religion. It was not under the control of the churches but was more individualistic, more bespoke. This coincided with, or may have been part of, another shift that was going on in western societies. Whereas at one time people sought salvation in another life, now they sought emotional well-being in this – hence the shift from organised religion to more informal spirituality.

We have become what the sociologist Frank Furedi calls the *Therapy Culture*. We seek emotional well-being.

And this has been embraced, no doubt unconsciously, by the religious as much as the non-religious.

This culture of emotional well-being has produced a form of spirituality that is practised by many chaplains and is widely welcomed in British society. It is not distinctive of any one religion such as Christianity or non-religion such as humanism, though it can draw on any of them, and can be practised by leaders from any faith or non-faith group. It transcends them all. It is generally thought to add value in the organisations that support chaplaincies.

The characteristics of this form of spirituality are these – and it is often at odds with traditional religion:

Chaplaincy spirituality is:

- Non-judgemental and inclusive: it accepts people of any sex or sexual orientation, any marital status, any colour, any ability or disability.
- It will stand alongside those who seek abortion or physician-assisted suicide. It does not seek to judge or change them.
- It will pray with them or give advice, if asked. But it does not seek to direct or control, as with traditional religion.
- Because above all, it seeks the welfare, the emotional well-being, of each unique individual.
- It supports rather than judges.

In a secular state and a diverse society, this form of chaplaincy spirituality is the acceptable face of religion in the public sphere. It accepts the ground rules of the secular state. But it is religion re-cast as the pursuit of individual, emotional well-being. Religious professionals like ourselves need to think hard and long about that.