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Values – Identity – Religion
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“WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCHES TO THE
EUROPEAN PROJECT –
HOW CAN THIS CONTRIBUTION BE MADE ?”

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I am glad to have been invited to participate in this consultation and look forward to hearing the perspective from the mainland. In London though not in the rest of the UK we seem to be passing from the post religious period in which most of us have spent our lives to a post secular era.

The enlightened are up in arms hurling defiance against the Almighty conscious that God has become once more un-ignorable. Daniel Dennett – Breaking the Spell; Sam Harris – Letter to a Christian Nation; Richard Dawkins – The God Delusion – a litany of hostility to God and religion which masks an anxiety within secular society that it is not the story of religion but rather the story of the Enlightenment which may contain more illusion than reality.

The Enlightenment story has its own Genesis narrative. It goes like this – the world finally woke up from slumber and the dark ages were made light about 300 years ago. In Northern and Western Europe there were heroes who opened the eyes of whole peoples to rational truth. Religion equated with ignorance and superstition gave way before science equated with fact and reason. Parochialism and tribal allegiances gave way to ecumenism, cosmopolitanism and individualism. Hierarchies and top down command systems were toppled and the church was separated from the state.

The story provides a blueprint for how to re-make the world and build the better country of which the Bible speaks. Incidentally the inheritors of the better country will be not so much the meek as the secular elites of the West.

There is much that is admirable in this story and whatever we do in the 21st century we must take care not to lose some of the gains. But alas any candid observer of the 20th century has to admit that the promised heaven on earth did not arrive but that rather secular messianic states were the direct cause of untold suffering and death in which religion was a victim and not an actor as had been the case in the long running Civil Wars of the 16th and 17th centuries.

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The process of modernisation in the rest of the world is not following the pattern established in NW Europe. In Iraq regime change under the banner of democracy and universal [in fact Western] values has been the foundation for chaos.

John Locke was an apostle of tolerance much esteemed by liberal Western opinion. He supported a policy of live and let live for believers of all stripes and even heretics but he did draw the line at atheists. He wrote “Lastly those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of God. Promises, covenants and oaths which are the bonds of human societies can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God though but even in thought, dissolves all.”

This surprising statement from such a source points to the causes for the anxiety which is so evident.

Yet there is no cause for religious people to be triumphalistic and try to outdo the God-deniers in shrillness. Suddenly it has also become urgent to distinguish in our country between healthful and lethal religion and to find the way to initiate the young into the former rather than the latter.

Lethal religion is one version of the idolatry which the prophets spend so much time denouncing. Lethal idolatry is the manufacture of gods out of our own rage and impotence. A bruised ego finds a surreptitious way to re-ascend by making a god in its own image.

The three Abrahamic religions are full of warnings on this subject but we are faced with a challenge that is evident from the lives of the 7-7 bombers. They were not poor; they were not marginalised; they were well educated but they were alienated having been assiduously groomed by the peddlers of lethal religion.

It is also a sorry truth that mere appeals for tolerance and moderation do not generate the energy necessary to counteract the appeal of what appears to those who fall for it, as self-sacrificing idealism. That is why I believe that there is only limited usefulness in trying to identify a common set of “universal values”, metaphysical abstractions which require a historical narrative before they can come to life.

Jesus Christ the human face of God was so aware of the dangers of lethal religion that his Sermon on the Mount begins with “how blest are those who know their need of God” and know how far away they are. In the letter to the Philippians it is made clear that any approach to the true and living God begins when we refuse to be a little god. “He made himself nothing taking the form of a servant.” That true humility which is close to the humus.

Those of us who are appointed to teach must always make this our starting point. The more experienced we are the more we need to acquire the beginner’s mind and to recognise our own frailty. It is a great protection against making god in our own image.

Conquest by any religion of the civic space is not a viable or desirable option for our pluralistic world built on justice and the rule of law. But at the same time to exclude faith from the universe of rational enquiry, to drive it from the public square as if it were some mere lifestyle choice like vegetarianism is also no longer a viable option.

We are beginning to understand for example how the ecological challenge we face is a function of a way of being in the world which is frankly autistic and lacks reverence and

awareness; and which arises from a false estimate of ourselves as masters and possessors of the earth rather than its stewards.

The real challenge that we face at the beginning of the 21st century is how to discover the wisdom to use the power which the discoveries of the 20th century have given us; how to channel that power in accordance with a spacious and generous vision of the human future.

It is true that faith without a dialogue with reason degenerates into fanaticism. But rationalism that does not understand its grounding and its limits and limitations is also inadequate. As Chesterton remarked “the madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason”.

This dialogue between faith and reason and the re-alignment which needs to take place in the relations between church and state in Europe is a project which has hardly begun but it is an urgent one.

In the absence of an educated religious public in the UK there is a new credulity. The Economist recently carried a story about the travails of a tabloid newspaper where one day the authorised astrology correspondent did not report for work. A somewhat cynical hack was set to work confecting the predictions. To relieve the boredom he wrote under Cancer the following message – “All the ills of yesteryear are as nothing to what will befall you today.” He thought it was a piece of fun but the switchboard was jammed with panicking readers and he was sacked.

The public education systems of Europe should not be used for proselytising or in the confessional interests of particular religious groups but there is a need to re-educate the public in the grammar of healthful religion and values. A modern curriculum for places of genuine education should embrace at least three things.

1. The next generation has to have the opportunity to acquire a greater degree of religious literacy, to provide the clue to so many of the master symbols of our culture and literature.
2. There is certainly a need to enunciate a clear ethical system which of course Christians will share with other people of goodwill.
3. There should also be attention [not as a divertissement but as a central part of the educational project at present dominated by economic considerations] to developing a spiritual awareness of the reality which lies beyond our own bodies and which is disclosed in music, in the arts, in sport, in the spiritual practices.

This is the modern curriculum for all but the Christian community is composed of those who have chosen to go further.

Jesus Christ, the human face of God offers a spacious and generous vision of the human future in a better country. Unlike the peddlers of lethal religion he does not seek to impose himself by force but comes as a child, in the form of a servant to offer his blood as a man for others and to love the loveless into loving. Familiarity has obscured how revolutionary his teaching is and unique his person. It is in turbulent times that we can begin to see him in fresh colours and a new light.

We must defend our pluralistic civic space. There must be limits on tolerance for those who seek to colonise this space in the interests of some monoculture.

At the same time there must be available in the public arena and open to the challenge of rational debate forms of healthful religion practised with the vividness and seriousness which can eclipse the allure of lethal religion. We need to practice a faith so confident that it is not paranoid or strident but is strong and attractive.

As it is of course, the prophetic words of Yeats ring desperately true in our own day. “The best lack all conviction and the worse are full of a passionate intensity. The centre cannot hold and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

My Muslim friends are not so much offended by expressions of Christian faith as they are saddened by the culture of irony and half heartedness which saps the energy of belief.

Attractive faith in dialogue with reason in the public square of our civic pluralism. Is it an impossible aspiration? Or is it even a recipe for disaster as Richard Dawkins suggests in his recent book, “The God Delusion” that “religious moderates make the world safe for fundamentalists”?

I believe that all the evidence points another way that lethal religion is free to flourish in a spiritual vacuum. How blest are those who know their need for God and who pursue their search in a gentle spirit but hungering and thirsting to see right prevail. How blessed are those who show mercy and whose hearts are pure, how blessed are the peace makers –they shall see God.

But if those who are called to be the salt of the earth become tasteless and the lights of the world hide themselves away, then what a betrayal is there and what a day of reckoning awaits.