

COSMOPOLIS AND THE CHALLENGE OF SECULARISM

I thank Brother Dunstan and the Lonergan Institute here at this beautiful St. Anselm's Abbey, for inviting me to speak at this Symposium entitled 'Liberated by God and His Church'. The topic is 'Cosmopolis and The Challenge of Secularism.' So three points. First, secularism; then, some thoughts from Pope Benedict; finally, cosmopolis. Forgive me speaking here predominantly from a British perspective, but I hope that what is said may also illuminate *pari passu* the North American situation.

1. Secularism

In the British media, hardly a day goes by without mention of a seeming collision between traditional Christian values and today's so-called 'secular culture.' Recent examples include a Pentecostalist couple from Derby who were not permitted to foster children because of their negative views on homosexuality, a ban upheld by the High Court.¹ Then there was a nurse in Somerset who, feeling sorry for an elderly patient, offered to pray for her, for which she was suspended, for failing to demonstrate a professional commitment to equality and diversity.² Again, there was the Catholic girl from Kent who was banned from wearing a crucifix at school.³ And some city councils regularly replace the word 'Christmas' with 'The Holiday Season' and one year, an Oxford council-funded charity referred to Christmas as 'The Winter Light Festival.'⁴

The terms secular, secularism and secularisation can be 'watery' and as Peter Berger *et al.* rightly assert in their 2008 *Religious America, Secular Europe*, mean different things in different places.⁵ European secularism is different from American, and secularism in Britain is different from that of France or southern Europe. Even so there are family likenesses. Secularism as a term was first used by the 19C agnostic George Holyoake to mean a way of thinking and acting focused on *this* world, that fosters material progress through human reasoning, with a morality based on human effort rather than religious principle.⁶ More an attitude or atmosphere than a fully worked-out system of thought, secularism essentially means a concern with the *saeculum*, the world, this world rather than the next. It has a political dimension: the principle that Church and State, religion

¹ BBC News 28th February 2011: see www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-12598896 (September 2014).

² BBC News 1st February 2009: see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7863699.stm (September 2014).

³ BBC News 13th January 2007: see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/kent/6258451.stm (September 2014).

⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* 2nd November 2008: see www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3367390/Christmas-banned-in-Oxford-by-council-owned-charity.html (September 2014).

⁵ Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (London, Ashgate: 2008).

⁶ "Secularism is that which seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest possible point, as the immediate duty of life which inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism or the Bible which selects as its methods of procedure the promotion of human improvement by material means, and proposes these positive agreements as the common bond of union, to all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service" G. Holyoake *The Principles of Secularism* (London, Austin and Co.: 1870) 17. Cf. discussion in G. D'Costa *Christianity and World Religions* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell: 2009) 110f.

and politics, be strictly separated. Religion, religious communities and religious beliefs about the meaning of life, the morally good, sex, marriage and the family, God and life after death, are ring-fenced as matters of private opinion and private association. Moreover, in order to protect the equality of every citizen in a pluralist society, politicians and policy makers intentionally adopt a neutral stance towards such religious groups and life-style choices, as long as individual and collective behaviour remains within the law. Even so, whilst secularism, particularly in Euro-American intellectual circles has led to the ascendance of atheism, agnosticism and indifference, it is not *per se* anti-religious. The issue is the role of religion in the public square. In Britain, hard-line secularists seek systematically to exclude religion from political discourse and to free state institutions such as schools and hospitals from religion; as the National Secular Society puts it, a freedom of religion must respect those who wish for a freedom *from* religion.⁷ Soft-core secularists, on the other hand, happily wish each other ‘Merry Christmas,’ send their children to Christian schools and tolerate society’s Christian traditions, as long as those who practice Christianity do not expect privileges, discriminate against the rights of others or seek to impose Christian views.

On closer inspection, secularism, perhaps surprisingly, could be said to be a form of Christian heresy. Its philosophy is a horizontalised version of the Christian world-view, one without the ‘sacred canopy.’⁸ Its ethic is based on the Golden Rule ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (cf. Luke 6: 13). This in turn leads to a derivative set of values such as tolerance, respect, compassion, equality, diversity, freedom, non-discrimination, inclusivity, integrity and fairness. These secular values are Christian values, albeit of a second order. They are a looser version of ‘Love thy neighbour’ without the ‘Love God’ that in Christian theology gives love of neighbour its vitality. The secular concern for tolerance, for instance, is a Christian value, but, in a nominalist manner disconnected from belief and practice, it has become looser, softer, malleable, free-wheeling, expandable with new meaning, and indeed, ultimately permissive of what formerly Christians deemed forbidden.

Secularism has fostered relativism and liberalism, and these have given rise to a raft of divergent anthropologies. Relativism is the philosophy that sees truth as relative: what is true for one group of individuals may not be true for another. It grounds liberalism. Liberalism is the moral philosophy that goodness has no firm foundation or referent and so values and virtues are determined by personal preference. The secular state, often without making explicit its own philosophical and ethical commitments and refusing to take its own stance on what is true and what is good, must either enforce one group’s truth-claims over another’s or, in the face of competing truth-claims, impose a permissive neutrality. This is the ‘dictatorship of relativism’ Pope Benedict famously spoke of, where what is right becomes what the State determines is legal.⁹ An example

⁷ See National Secular Society “What is Secularism?” online at: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html> (September 2014).

⁸ See R. Fisichella *The New Evangelisation: Responding to the Challenge of Indifference* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2012), especially 25-48. Cf. P. Berger *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Doubleday: 1967).

⁹ “Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine”, seems the

of this was the recent debate in Britain over marriage. Since liberalising legislation tends to carry within itself the seeds of its own extension, is it inconceivable that if the state can redefine marriage to be a union of two people of the same sex, then why not sibling marriage, or polygamous marriages, or maybe even inter-species marriage?

In Britain, secularism has been accompanied by secularisation, that is, the eclipse and demise of Christianity. In the 2011 National Census, the number of those who self-identified as Christian is now just 59% of the population (3 in 5). This is a decline from 71% in 2001; by 2018, Christians will be in a minority¹⁰. 1 in 4 (25% of the population) now say they have no religion, up from 14% in 2001. Church-going, which has been in continuous decline ever since records began in 1850, is now at a record low: only one in 25 attend a church regularly, defined as once a month.¹¹ Incidentally, Muslims are the next largest religious group, rapidly growing at 4.8% (up from 3% in 2001), then in order Hindus, Sikhs and Jews. Most Christians belong to the Church of England, whilst Catholics number about 5M or 8%.

Sociologists interpret this data variously. The classic view, called the ‘secularisation paradigm,’ measures church attendance. Its thesis is that the number of people attending Sunday worship has been in continuous decline as an inevitable accompaniment of modernity.¹² Callum Brown, however, in his *The Death of Christian Britain*, argues – and demonstrates empirically - that a catastrophic collapse in church membership occurred in 1970s, after the ‘60s with their far-reaching cultural, social and sexual revolutions: youth-culture, the music of the Beatles (1962), the contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women’s liberation movement (1968), easier divorce, and so on.¹³ The ‘Swinging Sixties’ represented the collapse of the traditional family, a sexual revolution that ushered in new gender roles for women, who, he avers, in a family uphold religious traditions and moral values. Others, such as Grace Davie,¹⁴ agree with this but argue that while Christian practice has declined, Christian beliefs still remain extant, although increasingly unconventional. These beliefs surface on public occasions, at royal weddings, at baptisms and funerals, especially at the funerals of children. Such flowerings of religious sentiment, Davie argues, show the British to be ‘unchurched’ but not necessarily non-believers. They believe, but they do not belong.

On the other hand, Graeme Smith argues that church-going is not the best nor the only measure of religiosity.¹⁵ Secularism, he says, is essentially Christian, as argued here,

only attitude [appropriate to] modern times. Yet [in this] we are building a dictatorship of relativism that recognizes nothing as definitive, and whose ultimate goal consists solely in one's own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism.”
Benedict XVI *Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice: Homily of Card. Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals Vatican Basilica Monday 18 April 2005*, available on-line at www.vatican.va/gpII/documents (September 2014).

¹⁰ See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html (September 2014).

¹¹ See *Why Church: Belonging and Believing* at <http://www.whychurch.org.uk/trends.php> (September 2014).

¹² See S. Bruce *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, Blackwell: 2002).

¹³ C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001).

¹⁴ G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994).

¹⁵ G. Smith *A Short History of Secularism* (London, Tauris: 2010).

although for him, it is *not* a heresy but an entirely legitimate version of Christianity. It may be true that most people do not attend church and do not believe in conventional Christian doctrines, but they do still believe in Christian ethics. Britain is a Christian ethics society and it is this that makes its culture Christian. Ethics is today's issue as evident in current debates about child-abuse, same-sex marriage and assisted suicide.

2. Pope Benedict XVI

The emeritus Pope Benedict XVI has left a body of magisterium relevant to this topic, which Pope Francis appears to be developing; indeed in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis states unambiguously that religious freedom includes the freedom to manifest one's beliefs in public. A healthy pluralism, he says,

“one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatising religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual's conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques. This would represent, in effect, a new form of discrimination and authoritarianism. The respect due to the agnostic or non-believing minority should not be arbitrarily imposed in a way that silences the convictions of the believing majority or ignores the wealth of religious traditions.¹⁶

Emeritus Pope Benedict, in his 2010 *Address to Politicians, Diplomats, Academics and Business Leaders at Westminster Hall*, Benedict discussed the place of religion within the political process and asked whether a solid, ethical foundation for civil discourse might be found. The Catholic Tradition, he said,

“maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers ... but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.”¹⁷

Indeed, just as religion is distorted by fundamentalism - faith without reason - so, “[w]ithout the corrective supplied by religion, ... reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person.”

This is why the

“world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilisation.”

Benedict rejects the key tenet of secularism, that religion be relegated to the private domain. There are some, he says, who argue that the public celebration

¹⁶ See Francis *Evangelii Gaudium. The Joy of the Gospel. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (London, CTS: 2013) 255.

¹⁷ For the text, see *Faith Today. Special Papal Visit Souvenir Edition* (Stoke on Trent, Alive Publishing: 2010) 82-87.

“of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. And there are those who argue – paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination – that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.”

Religion should not be seen as a problem for legislators but as a vital contributor to the national conversation.¹⁸

For Benedict, religion is alive despite the overlay of secularism; indeed, religion, he suggests, actually gives vitality to the values secularism espouses. Speaking after his 2010 visit to Britain, he said that he could see

“how strong the Christian heritage still is and how active it still is in social life at every level. British hearts and British lives are open to the reality of God and there were numerous expressions of religious feeling that my Visit made even more visible.”¹⁹

He went on, the

“visit [has] strengthened a deep conviction within me: the ancient nations of Europe have a Christian soul, which is one with the ‘genius’ and history of the respective peoples, and the Church [must] never stop working to keep this spiritual and cultural tradition ceaselessly alive.”

In other words, it could be argued that secularism itself and secular values such as tolerance thrive because secularism and its values derive their vitality from the Christian patrimony or religiosity still embedded within culture.

Benedict’s *Address* at Westminster Hall is often seen as forming a triptych with two other papers, his lecture “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections” given at Regensburg in 2006 and his “Reflections on the Foundations of Law” given in 2011 in the Bundestag, Berlin.²⁰

¹⁸ Interestingly, on a visit to the Vatican in 2012, Baroness Warsi, a former government minister and notably a Muslim, said that Europe needed to become more confident in its Christian identity in order to encourage a greater social cohesion:

“... [To] encourage social harmony, people need to feel stronger in their religious identities, more confident in their beliefs. ... Too often there is a suspicion of faith in our continent, where signs of religion cannot be displayed or worn in government buildings, where ... faith is sidelined, marginalised and downgraded. It all hinges on a basic misconception: That somehow to create equality and space for minority faiths and cultures, we need to erase our majority religious heritage.”

(slightly adapted). See www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-speech-in-the-holy-see (September 2014).

¹⁹ Benedict XVI *General Audience* Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 22 September 2010: available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100922 (September 2014).

²⁰ See Apostolic Journey of his Holiness Benedict XVI to München, Altötting and Regensburg (September 9-14, 2006): Meeting with the Representatives of Science in the Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg (Tuesday, 12 September 2006). *Lecture of the Holy Father 'Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections'* available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg (September 2014). See also Apostolic Journey to Germany 22-25 September 2011. Visit to the Bundestag. *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI*. Reichstag Building,

In the Regensburg lecture, Benedict explored more extensively the relationship of faith and reason within Western philosophy and theology. Faith without reason leads to fundamentalism, he states. God becomes a capricious god and not, as St. John insists in his Prologue, *logos*, and in this way faith without reason can lead to violence. On the other hand, Benedict also criticises post-Enlightenment philosophers, who reduce human reason to the empirically or mathematically demonstrable. Such positivism systematically excludes questions about human origin and destiny, ethics and religion, love and happiness. These issues are relegated to the subjective realm. The

“subject then decides, on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matters of religion, and subjective ‘conscience’ becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, ... ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter.”

His argument is that the privatisation of faith leads to a privatisation of ethics, and this creates the relativism and liberalism discussed above.

In his Bundestag address on the foundations of law, Benedict argues that in history, legal systems have almost always been founded on religion and whilst Christianity has never proposed a juridical order based on revelation, it has always pointed to nature and right reason as authentic sources. In the last half century, however, the idea of natural law has collapsed outside Catholic discourse. For many contemporary thinkers, there is an unbridgeable gulf between an “is” and an “ought” and, in the light of a positivistic understanding of human reason, as argued before, ethics and religion have been relegated to the subjective realm. This cuts law off from its classical sources. It was Christianity, Benedict says, that

“gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person, and the awareness of people’s responsibility for their actions. Our cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights. To ignore it or dismiss it as a thing of the past would be to dismember our culture totally and to rob it of its completeness.”

Indeed, the culture of Europe, he adds,

“arose from the encounter between Jerusalem, Athens and Rome, from the encounter between Israel’s monotheism, the philosophical reason of the Greeks and Roman law. This three-way encounter has shaped the inner identity of Europe. In the awareness of man’s responsibility before God and in the acknowledgment of the inviolable dignity of every single human person, it has established the criteria of law.”

3. Cosmopolis

Lastly, to Lonergan and ‘cosmopolis,’ a term he introduced in *Insight* but subsequently seems to have dropped, although he developed this helpful notion

Berlin Thursday, 22 September 2011 “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law” available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html (September 2014).

considerably in his later writings, particularly in the lucid if succinct account of progress, decline and religion in *Method in Theology*.²¹

For Lonergan, cosmopolis arises in the context of his attention to commonsense cognition. Cosmopolis is the human civilisation transcendently intended by, and resulting from, the immanent operations of persons in practical, economic and political collaboration. As David Nordquest opines, it is neither an organisation, nor an abstraction, nor for that matter a blueprint for *Utopia*.²² Cosmopolis is a culture that fosters progress through practical responses to the transcendental precepts ‘Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible, Be loving’, and which undoes the damage of decline brought about by individual and collective inattention, silliness, unreasonableness, irresponsibility and lack of love.²³ It is a culture that seeks to persuade rather than compel, and to release the creative powers of progress in society. As Robert Doran puts it,

“cosmopolis ... is the innermost constitutive set of intellectual habits informing the praxis of the creative minority without whose labours the distortions of the dialectic of community will not be reversed.”²⁴

For “while there is progress” Lonergan notes “and while its principle is liberty, there also is decline and its principle is bias.”²⁵ Individual and group bias twist developments, and even if particular instances can be remedied or somehow contained, general bias leading to the long cycle of decline inexorably prevail. A spiral of decline increasingly snags the wheel of progress and when this becomes institutionalised, a “civilisation in decline digs its own grave with relentless consistency.”²⁶ The only means of reversal and redemption, the solution to the human problem of evil, individual and collective, is a supernatural intervention, the grace of God, what Lonergan refers to as the ‘Law of the Cross.’²⁷

Cosmopolis consequently is a community that is also oriented towards religious faith, and open to God’s gift and revelation of His love. As Lonergan puts it in *Method*, a “religion that promotes self-transcendence to the point, not merely of justice but of self-sacrificing love [has] a redemptive role in human society, inasmuch as such love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress.”²⁸ Cosmopolis actively creates the conditions in which religion can exercise its redemptive role. From a philosophical perspective, it develops positions and reverses counter-positions, identifying and undoing ideologies and rationalisations that prosper

²¹ See Bernard Lonergan *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3 (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 1992) chapter 7, especially 263-267 and Bernard Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 52-55.

²² See David A. Nordquest “Cosmopolis: Bourget’s and Lonergan’s” in *METHOD: Journal of Lonergan Studies* Vol. 11 No. 1 (Spring 1993) 37-50.

²³ cf. *Method* 53-54. Cf. Gerard Whelan SJ *Redeeming History: Social Concern in Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran* (Rome, Gregorian and Biblical Press: 2013) 94-95.

²⁴ Robert M. Doran SJ *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 1990) 364. ²⁵ *Insight* 260.

²⁶ *Method* 55.

²⁷ For a fine account of this, see V. Gregson “V. Theological method and theological Collaboration II”, especially 112-114, in Vernon Gregson ed. *The Desires of the Human Heart* (New York, Paulist Press: 1988).

²⁸ *Method* 55.

the long cycle of decline. But from a theological perspective, cosmopolis is identical with the Kingdom of God that Jesus Christ preached, in which graced humanity, overcoming sin and error, cooperates with Him for the redemption of all.²⁹

By focusing human energy on the *saeculum*, secularism in both its American and European forms has enabled enormous progress in human material and social welfare. Many of its values, such as fairness, equality and freedom of expression, have been successfully received and applied in an era of social and cultural transition marked by mass migration. Nevertheless, it could be argued in the light of Lonergan's analysis that secularism distorts the conditions of possibility for cosmopolis and through its inherent shortcomings makes a major contribution to the long cycle. At root, secularism is an ideology that truncates human subjectivity. First, its positivist epistemology sunders and compartmentalises whole sectors of human experience, understanding and knowledge. Secondly, its moral relativism undermines human flourishing by rationalising and condoning aberrant behaviours in individuals and groups, leading in time to psychological and social disintegration. And thirdly, by intentionally excluding religion from the public square, religion's redemptive role in society is gravely occluded.

Pope Benedict's concern for Western civilisation in general and for Europe in particular led him fervently to promote the new evangelisation initiated by his predecessor. This means for individuals, promoting a new personal encounter with the love of Jesus Christ, and on a socio-cultural level, recovering and revitalising the Christian patrimony underpinning Western cultures. It also means responding to what St. John Paul II called "the greatest challenge of our age," a "growing separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture"³⁰ by seeking to 'baptise' the vast sectors of contemporary culture, from politics and economics to medicine, the arts and the human sciences, at present unleavened by the Gospel. The new evangelisation will need to demonstrate how the Gospel of Christ is for individuals the authentic way to personal happiness and for culture, an authentic humanism, able to ground a free, democratic and pluralist society.

As a bishop, I am committed wholeheartedly to this project and my own personal intellectual, moral and spiritual commitments inevitably influence my assessment of secularism. As a foundation for culture, secularism is too flimsy. It cannot sustain long term the advances the peoples of Britain have achieved, such as the value placed on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law, or the strong sense of individual rights and duties, and of the equality of all citizens before the law.³¹ Instead, arguably it is generating a society without foundations, that is easily swayed by emotional appeal and that develops randomly on the hoof through pressure-groups, legal precedent and political expediency. Its ring-fencing of religion

²⁹ *Insight* 741-744 and Chapter 20 *passim*.

³⁰ John Paul II *Inter Munera Academicarum* 2, available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19990128_inter-munera-academicarum_en.html (September 2014).

³¹ These qualities Pope Benedict highlighted in his Address in Westminster Hall: see *Faith Today. Special Papal Visit Souvenir Edition* 83.

to the private domain, its eclipse of the ground of ethics and the basis of law, its amnesia of history and our culture's Christian origins, its relativism that facilitates harmful ideologies that lead to the victimisation of the weak, the unborn child, the elderly and the terminally ill, its positivistic reduction of human knowing to the empirically verifiable, its seeming inability to support stable marriages and family life, its growing restriction on religious freedom, and its inherent tendency towards greater surveillance and state-control, all suggest that Christians have a liberating 'anthropological mission' within contemporary culture. This mission is summed up exactly by the title of this Symposium: 'Liberated by God and His Church.'

How this might be done through an evangelisation "new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression" is for another time. What gives me great hope is that, on the one hand, the question of God lies naturally within the human horizon,³² and that on the other, even at this very moment, the Holy Spirit is moving with great energy across the face of the earth.

Thank you for listening.

³² See *Method* 101-103.