

The Papal Visit

Sermon preached at St Mary's, Barnes on September 26th by Richard Harries

I don't know if you would agree, but it seems to me that the Papal visit, despite a fairly hostile press, turned out to be rather successful, both from a Catholic and a wider Christian perspective. Before it fades entirely it is worth reflecting on some of the challenging points the Pope made, not just to his own church, but to the nation.

At the beginning of the visit he had warned against aggressive forms of secularism, and in his address to parliament said "I cannot but voice my concern at the increasing marginalisation of Christianity that is taking place in some quarters." This brought forth a response from David Cameron, as reported in one headline, "We are not a secular society." Clearly by the end of the trip the Pope had changed his mind somewhat and moved towards that position, for when he got back to Rome he referred to what he called four intense and very beautiful days which had enabled him "to see how much the Christian legacy is still strong and active at every level of social life."

So how should our society be described? Is it secular? A Book by the distinguished Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor is called simply A Secular Age. In it he contrasts life in 1400 with life now. Then every aspect of life, public and private, outward and inward, assumed the reality of God. This was the fundamental reality in which all life was seen. Now, the Christian view is one amongst others. Taylor, a Catholic, certainly does not think it inevitable that unbelief will grow. But the point is that there are alternatives to Christian belief, and as we know, in some circles we have to argue for it against the prevailing climate of opinion. Taylor's analysis seems to me a fair description of our age. Nor is it true that our

public sphere is inherently secular. There are many ways in which, as the Pope said, the Christian legacy is still strong and active in our public institutions and life.

However, the Pope quite properly raised a fundamental question. As he put it “If moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident—herein lies the real challenge to democracy.”

In short, what is the foundation for the values of our society? Is there such a foundation, or our values just what he called “a social consensus”?

I think it is important to affirm that all human beings, just by virtue of being human, whatever we believe or do not believe, have some capacity for moral awareness. Except for psychopaths, we have imagination and some ability to enter sympathetically into the fragile lives of others. Our ability to affirm and realise values, especially moral values, but also religious and aesthetic ones, is rooted in this capacity for imaginative sympathy. From a Christian point of view this is part of what we mean by being made in the image of God. In old fashioned terminology, it was what was meant by saying that there is a natural moral law; moral standards which all ought to be able to agree on, just by virtue of being human.

Now it is true that today people have very varied or very confused notions of what might be the basis of such values. That is not surprising, for this is a difficult subject and these are confusing times. For Christians all that is valuable ultimately comes from God, for he is the source and standard of all that is true and good and beautiful. But if you don't believe that, you can indeed flounder around for a secure foundation of what you value.

Nevertheless, that said, I do not believe we should disparage the concept of social consensus. In a pluralist society like ours it is important to try to build up the common ground of what matters to us as a society. In this task Christians, along with others, have a role to play. It is a particularly important task at the moment, because for three or more decades our society has dominated by a combination of economic and social libertarianism with the only benchmark being the notion that if it is legal it is alright. This isn't enough. There are more basic considerations, like "Is it honourable?" "Is it right?" And we need to work at these as a society.

So what difference does our Christian faith make? First, it is important to note simply as a fact, that the fundamental values of our society whilst certainly owing something to secular thought owe even more to our Christian history and culture. As the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas, writing from a secular agnostic point of view has written recently, "Philosophical concepts such as those of the person, freedom and individuation, history and emancipation, community and solidarity, are infused with experiences and connotations which stem from the biblical teaching and its tradition,"

Secondly, in the light of this we can ask the question, without presuming to give an answer either way, what would be the effect of a further weakening of the Christian faith on our society? Seamus Heaney the Nobel prize winning poet has suggested that we are living on a moral unconsciousness provided by the past, and he doubted if his grandchildren would still have that.

Thirdly, as the Pope put it, in a difficult sentence referring the moral norms, "The role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms...but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles." That, as I say, is a difficult sentence because it is

shorthand for a huge debate, so let me just put it very simply in terms of you and your agnostic neighbour. You and your agnostic neighbour are chatting. This neighbour, let us say, has values you much appreciate and share, but they don't think much of religion, and they argue that their values stand in their own right independent of any religious view. I don't think we should simply slag that point of view off. Rather, as Christians I think we should recognise, affirm and give thanks to God for good values wherever they are to be found, and whether or not we think the person has a shaky foundation for them. Let us give thanks for what is good to the source of all goodness.

I think the agnostic who puts forward good values is like someone who hears and appreciates a particular musical theme. The Christian is someone who knows that this theme is part of a grand symphony. They do not denigrate that theme, of course not, but they believe they can see how it fits in to a much richer, fuller and more wonderful whole. And this, we hope and pray makes a difference.

So in talking to our agnostic neighbour, both of us apply our reason, to use the Pope's term, in discussing the moral norms our society needs. But into the discussion we will bring our whole Christian understanding of what it is to be a human being in society. This means at least three things. First, we will have a less individualistic understanding of what it means to be human, than our culture does. For we are not isolated individuals. The Africans have a word for it, Ubuntu. We are only persons only in and through our relationship with other persons; we are bound up together. Secondly, we will not think that getting on or self-fulfilment, however important, are the overriding priorities in life. Rather, the overriding priority is to do what is right, which includes taking our career or fulfilment into account, but only as elements within a more important calling. For a Christian what is right is inseparably linked to our vocation to allow God's purpose

of love to work in and through us at all times and in all circumstances. Then, thirdly, we will not judge what is success or failure purely in terms of our own highly competitive and in many ways, vulgar society. For, made in the image of God, we are called to grow into his likeness, a goal whose consummation lies beyond space and time.

We do indeed live in a society where secular voices are now strident, but whether militant or restrained, it is good that the Pope has opened up more widely the question of how our Christian voices are to relate to those voices. What we have in common is the use of our human reason. What we bring to bear is a thankful spirit for all that is good. Even more, a wonderfully rich and beautiful vision of what it is to be a human being in society, made in the Divine image, called to grow into his likeness now and for ever.

It is obviously over to us to show that this wonderful vision does indeed make a difference both personally and in the public sphere.

Richard Harries was Bishop of Oxford from 1987-2006. On his retirement he was made a Life Peer, (Lord Harries of Pentregarth), and he continues to be active in the House of Lords. He is Gresham Professor of Divinity, and also an Honorary Professor of Theology at King's College, London. He is the author of a number of books on the interface of Christian faith and the wider culture, including the arts. His most recent books are The Re-enchantment of Morality (SPCK), Faith in Politics? Rediscovering the Christian roots of our political values, (DLT), Issues of Life and Death:

Christian faith and medical intervention (SPCK), and Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics, ed with Stephen Platten, (OUP).

His current Gresham Lectures are on **Christian Themes in Art**. The first one is on Wednesday 20th October at 1 pm at the Museum of London. Lectures are free and open to the public. Full details can be found on the internet by typing in Gresham College.