

## **BEING CATHOLIC IN A SECULAR CULTURE**

Thank you very much – Bp Mark, Barbara and all of you - for inviting me! I'll speak for 40 minutes, set a discussion-question then comment on the feedback. The title of this paper is Being Catholic in a Secular Culture. The title suggests a route: first, What do we mean by a secular culture, the secular, secularism, secularisation? Then, in the light of this: How as Catholics, and how as the Catholic Church in Britain, might we respond?

### 1. What do we mean by a Secular Culture?

Let me begin by recalling 3 recent experiences as a priest:

- 1<sup>st</sup>, one morning in Romiley, a woman parishioner came into sacristy to ask me to sign a Mass card for her daughter, who had been trying for ages for a baby. The daughter had been undergoing IVF treatment. She was not married. Her mother wanted me to offer the Mass for the success of the IVF treatment.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> example, from Portsmouth: a priest who had been having stomach pains, swung by an NHS Drop-in Clinic. The nurse sat him down and after a few exploratory points started asking him very personal and invasive questions about his sex-life. He stopped her. All this was irrelevant. He was a Catholic priest. He was vowed to celibacy and chastity. The nurse looked surprised and exclaimed: Why on earth do you not want to have sex?
- 3<sup>rd</sup> example. An elderly man went into hospital but started rapidly to go downhill. The doctors told his son there was nothing they could do and so they would put his father on the Liverpool Care Pathway. After a while, they proposed that his feeding and hydration be withdrawn. The son consented. Feeding and hydration was withdrawn. He passed away 12 days later.

#### 1.1 The Rise of Secularism

Secularism (Lat. saeculum, the world) is more an attitude, an approach, an atmosphere, than a full worked-out system of thought. Basically, it means a concern with the world, this world as opposed to the next. It excludes the religious and ecclesiastical in favour of the here and now. It ring-fences religious questions about the ultimate meaning of life, what is morally good, God and life after death, deeming these matters of personal opinion. Secularism is about living in society, without the horizon of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Secularism originated in 17C after the Reformation and the wars of religion with the growth of deism, agnosticism and religious indifference, first among the philosophers

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Fisichella *The New Evangelisation: Responding to the Challenge of Indifference* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2012), especially 25-48.

of 18C and 19C, and then among the masses of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It caught on, in the new democratic nation-states of Western Europe, which emphasised individual freedom, equality and tolerance. At the same time, it drew life from the empiricism of modern science, the success of modern technology and the pervasive affluence of modern consumerism and welfare. Today, secularism has become so dominant in our culture, that being religious is treated as exceptional. Where once the Christian Church was central, today it is peripheral, one 'faith-community' among others. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, our Western democracies are such that we all now live under a "regime of secularism"<sup>2</sup>. Secularism has two political principles: that the state be strictly separated from religious institutions, and that people of different religious beliefs are all equal before the law. In other words, to protect the equality of all citizens in a diverse, pluralistic society, politicians and policy makers should take a neutral or impartial attitude, towards spirituality, personal morality and religious belief, as long as people's behaviour remains acceptable and within the law.

Secularism is itself a world-view; in fact, it is a surrogate religion, or better, a Christian heresy. If we define religion as belief in a deity, with a moral code or way of life based on that belief, and a theology that interprets it, then secularism is an inverse religion. Its core belief is doubt; it proposes a way of life and moral code *etsi Deus non daretur*, as if God does not exist; and its world-view is based on a belief in man, in this world and in this life. It even has its own theological 'buzz-words' such as diversity, equality, non-discrimination, freedom, respect, tolerance, multiculturalism, social cohesion, ethnic communities, inclusivity, quality of life, sustainable development, environmentalism, faith-schools, etc. Many of these concepts are positive, because they derive from underlying Christian values and so, in its concern for human and social well-being, secularism betrays its origins in Christian culture. It is a deconstructed version of that culture, if you like, a Christian heresy, an ideology that can exist only because it lives off a patrimony: that of Christian culture with its history, laws and values.

Secularism comes in two forms with a sliding scale between. Yet both hard-core secularists and soft-core liberal secularists, it is important to note, permit religion to continue to exist. Hard-liners, the members of the National Secular Society, seek systematically to exclude religion from public discourse; as Alasdair Campbell once famously said "We don't do God."<sup>3</sup> Liberal secularists, on the other hand, happily wish each other 'Merry Christmas.' They tolerate Britain's Christian traditions, even having an established church, but only as long as those traditions do not discriminate against the newly-won rights of minority groups, such as those of the homosexual community.

## 1.2 The Process of Secularisation

Let me now say a word about secularisation and the demise of Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Maclure and C. Taylor *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (London, Harvard UP: 2011) 9f

<sup>3</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3301925.stm> (4th November 2012). He made the comment in 2003 from the sidelines to a journalist interviewing the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who was about to ask the PM about his religious convictions.

The current population of the UK is about 60M. According to the recent census, 79% claim to believe in God and 72% self-identify as Christian of one sort or another<sup>4</sup>. Most Christians belong to the Anglican Church (27M). Catholics number about 4.5M or 8% - relatively small. Muslims make up 1.3M or about 1 in 20 of the UK population, Hindus 500K or just under 1%, and in smaller proportions Sikhs, Jews and Buddhists. In Britain, there is a lot of data available on religious belief. The first national census was taken in 1850 and the questionnaire always includes something on religion. This data has been studied extensively by sociologists.

Steve Bruce expresses the classic view. In his God is Dead, he explains the so-called 'secularisation paradigm:' that since the Middle Ages and certainly since records began, Christianity in Britain has been in continuous decline. This is shown by less and less people attending Sunday worship. The decline is an inevitable consequence, he argues, of modern life. Moreover, since today people rarely go to church and so rarely have contact with Christian teaching, conventional Christian beliefs are also in steep decline: in a personal God, in the divinity of Christ, in heaven and hell, in the importance of piety, and in traditional sexual morality. Bruce demonstrates that if this decline in Christian practice and belief continues – and statistically there is nothing to show that it will not - within the next 20 years religious practice in Britain will be too small and insignificant to feature in usual statistical surveys. Indeed, many smaller Christian communities will vanish. The Methodist Church will fold early in the 2020s.<sup>5</sup>

Callum Brown, in his The Death of Christian Britain<sup>6</sup>, accepts this secularisation paradigm but argues that although there was a decline statistically from 1850 down into the 1960s, the real catastrophic collapse in Christian practice 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. The 'Swinging Sixties' saw the rise of mass media-entertainment, better health-care and a growing prosperity and comfort. According to Brown, the key issue was the collapse of the traditional family, the sexual revolution with the rise of new gender roles for women, who in a family usually upheld traditions and moral values. Since '70s, family life has changed out of all recognition. This, he argues, more than anything else has led to the collapse of church-membership. British people have now stopped going to church. They have allowed their memberships to lapse; they have stopped marrying in church; and they have stopped baptising their children. The result is that Christianity is now marginal to vast swathes of daily life. Today, less than 5% UK population are active church-goers, defined as

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing the data from the 2011 Census was not available. The data used here is that from the 2001 Census for England and Wales, available on-line from the Office for National Statistics at [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html) (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See S. Bruce *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, Blackwell: 2012)

<sup>6</sup> C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001)

attending church once per month. This is one of the lowest religious-practice rates in the world.

In Religion in Britain since 1945,<sup>7</sup> Grace Davie takes the same line. Yet she maintains that whilst practice has declined, Christian beliefs still remain. These beliefs come to the surface at royal weddings, the death of Princess Diana, at baptisms and funerals, especially the death of a child or the loss of a loved one. If anything, funerals, obituaries and memorial services are now more popular than ever. Such flowerings of religious sentiment show that the British today are in a situation of 'believing but not belonging'. The Brits are 'unchurched,' she argues; they are not un-believers. They believe but they do not belong. The National Secular Society may be vociferous yet its membership – as seen during the visit of Pope Benedict in 2010 - is not large.

We must also mention here Graeme Smith. In his controversial 2010 A Short History of Secularism, Smith argues against the secularisation paradigm. He claims church-going is not the only or the best measure of religiosity, that Victorian church-going was exceptionally high compared with the Middle Ages, and that secularism is essentially – as we have tried to argue too – Christian. For Smith, however, secularism is not a heresy but an entirely legitimate version of Christianity. It may be true that most people in 21C Britain do not believe in Christian doctrine. But that does not matter. They still believe in Christian ethics. Britain is a Christian culture because we live in what, he calls, a Christian ethics society. Ethics is today's issue and constantly debated: the abuse of children, the right to die, abortion, and so on.

### 1.3 The Dictatorship of Relativism

Let me add one final feature to this picture. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 2005, in a homily at Mass to the cardinals who had come to Rome to elect a new pope, the then Cardinal Ratzinger, famously said this:

"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 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."

The 'dictatorship of relativism' has become one of Pope Benedict's best-known phrases. What does he mean?

Relativism is about seeing the truth as relative. It is the attitude that what's true for you may not be true for me. It leads to liberalism, to moral values determined by personal

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<sup>7</sup> G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994)

preference, not necessarily derived from the natural law – the truth written into every human heart - or Christianity. Totalitarianism or dictatorship is when the law enforces such relativism and liberalism, imposing moral values and behaviour derived not from right reason or true religion but by the will of the State: by individuals and powerful pressure-groups that manage to persuade the State and the law to take their side. In this way, what is 'right' becomes what is permitted: "as long as it's safe and legal". It is exactly this that lies behind the debate about the proposed redefinition of marriage.

On a visit to the Vatican in February 2012, Baroness Varsi, notably a Muslim, said that in Britain we need to become more confident in our Christianity and Christian heritage:

In order 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 states won't fund faith schools and 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.

British law was moulded by the natural law and by Christianity. Today, it is determined by lawmakers and policy-planners, educators and health-care professionals, pressure-groups and media, business and commercial interests, that no longer share those common values. They lobby for what's modern, liberal, economic, the most expedient, that which enables them to do what they want to do. The law is now increasingly adrift. It expresses the will of the legislator, the will of the loudest and most powerful, or the will of the majority, not the natural law or our Christian heritage. This relativism – the truth depends on what you make it – is State-enforced. It now threatens to victimise the weak and the elderly, to victimise you and me as Catholics, to victimise family life and sound moral values, and most egregiously to victimise the unborn child and the dying.<sup>8</sup> We used to be able to say "We live in a free country." But, as someone asked me recently, in Britain today, in PC World, can we really say that anymore?

## 2. Being Catholic Today

How, then, as Catholics, and how as the Catholic Church in Britain, might we respond?

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes says "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc 1:9). Yet in some way there is! In her 2000 year history, the Church has never before passed through such a highly sophisticated, affluent, busy, secularised culture as ours. We now realise what happens when she does. We see a precipitous decline in practising Catholics, in Mass attendance, in confessions, marriages and vocations. We lose people; families break down; priests leave; scandals arise; faith becomes a

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the issues raised here, see M. Nazir-Ali *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism* (London, Bloomsbury: 2012).

hobby; people dip in and out; religious orders evaporate and parishes need to be clustered or closed. There are 4.5M Catholics in the UK: yet only about 18% practice. Interestingly, the situation of the Catholic Church in Britain and Europe is exceptional. On a world scale, the Catholic Church has never ever been so big; there have never been so many priests; nor so many churches. Yet in Europe, the Church is in decline and this is now evident in UK.<sup>9</sup> If Pope John Paul II had a special concern for the Eastern bloc, Pope Benedict's concern is the West. He wants to revitalise faith, to reach out to the huge numbers of Western Europeans who seem to have lost their way, and to offer our pluralist Western democracies the leaven of the Gospel to combat relativism and to promote authentic human values.

## 2.1 The Shift to 'Evangelistic Catholicism'

Numbers of course are not everything. In the Gospels, Jesus uses various images for the Church: the salt of the earth (Mt 5: 13), a city on a hilltop (Mt 5: 14), a lamp on the lampstand (Mt 5: 15), a leaven or yeast in the dough (Lk 13: 20-21). He did not promise full churches: if anything, he seems to envisage a small band, a faithful remnant, a tiny flock (cf. Lk 12: 32). If in the past, huge numbers were important, today what counts more and more is the clarity of witness. Indeed, this is one of the greatest changes in the universal Catholic Church since Vatican II: a growing concern with evangelisation, the desire to witness to the truth, to proclaim clearly and simply the Good News. It is bringing about a shift from a static, institutional, maintenance-model of the Church, to a much more missionary-minded 'evangelistic Catholicism.'

This new awareness became central to John Paul II who spoke about evangelisation on all his world tours and visits. Since the 1980s and '90s, many new movements have been emerging, like green shoots. JP2 also instituted world youth days (WYDs), huge three-yearly gatherings of young people for catechesis, prayer, celebration and public witness. Although rarely reported in the British media, these have been very successful. The 1995 WYD in the Philippines drew the largest crowd ever to gather on the surface of the planet: 7.5M people. The 2011 WYD in Spain drew nearly 2M people, although the only aspect reported by the BBC was the protest of a few hundred homosexuals.

At the root of this, is the Church's new awareness of culture. To proclaim the Gospel effectively, we must understand the culture in which we preach. We are the People of God; we belong to an ecclesial culture. But we are also people of our times, and that tension between the ecclesial and the secular, all us must 'mediate:' it goes on within us. In 1983, in an address in Latin America, JP2 suddenly used a new theological term in this regard. He said what we need is 'new evangelisation,' (NE) an evangelisation that is 'new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the contrast between the European view of religious affiliation and the American and overseas views, see J. Casanova "The Secular, Secularisation, Secularisms" in ed. C. Colhoun, M. Juergensmeyer and J. Van Antwerpen *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford UP, 2011) 54-74.

expression.<sup>10</sup> The implication was that the usual or classic evangelisation was not working; something more was called for. This term, NE, has since gained currency as a specific theological reality, and has appeared ever more regularly in Church teaching documents. In 2010, Pope Benedict established a Pontifical Council for NE. Last month, the Synod of Bishops met to discuss the theme “NE for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” – the immediate background to the present Year of Faith.

What then does the term NE mean? Some notes.

## 2.2 New Evangelisation

Church documents suggest there are now three types of evangelization:

- missio ad gentes: i.e. primary proclamation to people who have never heard the Gospel before (in non-Christian contexts, such as for instance Arabia etc.) ;
- classic or ordinary evangelization: i.e. all other contexts; and then
- new evangelisation (NE). This term is used in relation to persons, contexts and situations where people have already been baptized. Of good will, they may be connected with the Church through the school, but are no longer (or not yet) in a real, living, life-changing relationship with Christ. In other words, NE is addressed to people who have drifted away from practice or who are not yet on fire with love for Christ and the Gospel.

As with all forms of evangelisation, NE is essentially a two-way movement: ad intra and ad extra, or reaching in and reaching out, that is:

- reaching in (ad intra), ourselves growing and deepening in our faith, hope and love for Christ and his Church, ourselves being evangelized; and
- reaching out to others (ad extra) with the basic message of Good News.

Moreover, NE like all evangelisation is never principally a programme. As JP2 said:

We are ... not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme".<sup>11</sup>

In other words, NE, like all evangelisation is about a Person, Jesus Christ, and a living relationship with him in his Body the Church.

The term NE is still a bit watery. But essentially it has three features which we might group around JP2's phrase 'new ardour, new expressions, new methods'

- 1<sup>st</sup>, new ardour. NE is about ourselves being fired up with a new ardour for our faith, with fire in the belly, with a personal-passionate love for Christ. This will naturally equip us and make us want to reach out to others. This requires a new awareness of our Catholic distinctiveness: that we are different from others, that we know our faith, that we are confident about who we are.

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II *Discourse to the Assembly of CELAM* cited in Fisichella 22

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Vatican City, 2001) n. 29

- 2ndly, new methods. NE must be street-wise, media-savvy, critically aware of the culture we live in. Contemporary culture is less a text-based, book culture, more a visual culture of image, art, style, design. We need to see our Catholic Tradition as a tool-box from which things old and new can be taken and used to communicate the message imaginatively and attractively.
- 3rdly, NE is new in its expression. NE is Christo-centric, i.e. thoroughly centred on the Person of Christ and being a disciple, within his Body, the Church. NE is not about preaching the Church, enhancing the institutions of the Church, getting more people to come to church, but rather to present the attractive figure of Jesus of Nazareth and his Gospel.

So let me end with some practical suggestions on being Catholic in a secular culture.

### 2.3 Some Proposals

When 50 years ago the Second Vatican Council opened, the question the Church faced at the time was: What does it mean to be the Church of Christ in the modern world? Today, the issue is more fundamental: Does God exist? And if he does, what difference does it make to the way I live?

The Year of Faith is a well-chosen theme. I have two specific hopes for it. First, that as Catholics we will become more aware of our distinctiveness, and thus more “critical” of the culture we live in, in Britain today. It seems to me that the key reason for the attrition in practice among parishioners, families, the young, children and teachers, is a crippling naïveté or lack of awareness of the exciting but corrosive nature of our busy, consumerist, secular culture. In this regard, it would be helpful to recover the model used by our early English saints and missionaries: St. Paulinus, St. Chadd, St. Aidan. They, in a culture that already knew of Christianity, managed to plant the Gospel and foster vigorous growth by living as true Eucharistic communities, whilst undertaking peregrinationes evangelicae or missionary journeys.<sup>12</sup> This is why we need to make a real shift from the old, institutionalist thinking to a truly evangelistic Catholicism, becoming more confident in the beauty of our faith and what it can offer our society today. To do this, we need to make an attitudinal shift from an ecclesio-centric to a Christo-centric world-view, to talking less about the Church and more about Jesus and his Gospel. This is far easier for younger Catholics than for older, who tend to become concerned with structural changes in the Church, the end of celibacy, clustering parishes, going back to pre Vatican II, and so on.

But secondly, developing a greater ‘interiority.’ Religion will never go away, despite the most hard-core secularist. This is because every human being is a spiritual being, seeking happiness and fulfilment, and as Augustine says, the human heart is restless

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<sup>12</sup> For an initial exploration of this, see S. Bevans and R. Schroeder *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, Orbis: 2004) 119-125



until it rests in God. More, we believe that the Holy Spirit is active in every child, woman and man on earth in a way known only to God.<sup>13</sup> Theologically, this is because the Outer Word of revelation comes to us from Christ through history in the preaching and witness of the Church. But there is also the Inner Word of the Spirit preparing the way for the reception of this Good News.

The culture we live in thrives on noise and distraction, busyness and entertainment; it makes us live 'out there' not 'in here'; it drowns out the inner voice of God. This is why we need to devise better strategies for teaching people to pray, to listen, to reflect. We must pray that the Spirit will be poured out afresh, that the gift of faith will be given liberally, that others will hear the call of God. We need to focus on creating moments of silence, on developing the religious sense, on educating people to listen, and especially to find Jesus whose Heart streams with love for us in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. If we could help others develop a greater 'interiority' then maybe they will find the answer to the deepest yearnings of their heart.

To conclude. Like Christ her Master, the Church will never be popular nor, because of human sinfulness, will she appeal to everyone, despite our best efforts. It is not the product we are offering that is defective but the ability of people in today's secular culture to receive it. We need enormous creativity if we are to engage effectively with the new generations of 21C. That is why we can do no better than pray earnestly to the Holy Spirit for his many gifts so that we will be well-equipped to face the exciting challenges ahead.

So let me end with a question for you to discuss during the break and come back with some ideas:

#### QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

In this Year of Faith, how can I myself, and how can I help others, discover the Spirit of Christ beckoning within?

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Paul II *Dominum et Vivificantem* 53 in ed. J. Dupuis *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church. Seventh Revised and Enlarged Edition.* (New York, Alba: 2011) 448 (n. 1048)