

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Let's begin with a minute in silence, each of us in our own way praying for one another and giving thanks for being here this evening.

I thank Fr. John, the parish here of St. Joseph's, Mr. Karnail Pannu and the Windsor and Maidenhead Community Forum for inviting me. The purpose of the Forum, which admirably has been working for over 30 years, is a noble one: to strengthen understanding, respect and mutual trust between the different religious communities of Windsor and Maidenhead and in this way to foster community cohesion. So it is an honour for me to be here as the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth in which the Royal Borough lies. I am delighted to greet Rabbi Jonathan Romain from the Maidenhead Synagogue, Rev Sally Lynch from St. Luke's, Church of England, other members of the Forum, and indeed, all of you here tonight.

My topic is *Interreligious Dialogue: A Catholic Christian Perspective*. So first, let me say something on how Catholic Christians view other religions; then, the situation of religion here in the UK; and finally, some thoughts on how all of us as "people of religion" might better collaborate for the common good.

1. Catholic Christians and Interreligious Collaboration

First, to be clear I speak as a Christian. I believe in a personal God, an all-powerful Creator and loving Father. I believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, who became incarnate, died and rose again. I believe too in the Holy Spirit, Who continues Christ's mission across space and time, inviting everyone into the Body of Christ, the Church. So I speak as a Catholic Christian, in communion with the Pope of Rome. I see the Church, although made up of sinful human beings, as anchored on a Divine foundation. I 'stand under' the Church's Bible, the Church's Tradition and the Church's Teaching, and that teaching compels me to respect, dialogue and collaborate with members of other religions, for mutual enrichment and human betterment.

Catholicism is enthusiastically committed to interreligious collaboration. The most authoritative Church statement on this, repeated in the *Catechism* and other recent teaching from Rome, is the document from the Second Vatican Council called *Nostra Aetate* [NA], the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to the non-Christian Religions.¹ Catholics have many questions about other religions, about the role they play in God's plan, and about how these religions relate to Christianity, which believes in the unique revelation of Jesus Christ. At the time of the Vatican Council in

¹ For text, see A. Flannery ed. *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York, Costello Publishing Company: 1975/1987) 738-742. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 839-845; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Vatican, 1991) and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus* (Vatican, 2000)

the 1960s, the Church was especially concerned to address the evils of anti-Semitism, to underline the deep spiritual bonds shared between Christians and Jews, and to repent of the persecutions of Jews in history by Christians. So NA began life as a document on this, but as the Council progressed, it grew into a more comprehensive statement on all the chief religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.² Its opening lines demonstrate its purpose: how the Catholic Church wants to “foster unity and charity,” reflecting on all that we “have in common, and what tends to promote fellowship” (NA 1).

For Catholics, Vatican II marked a shift in attitude towards the world in general from a defensive posture to a posture of dialogue. In the period from 16C, with the rise of modernity, with modern science and scholarship often hostile to Christian faith, the Church took a defensive, even embattled attitude. However, as the 20C unfolded, the need for a different, more positive approach became clear if the Church was to engage in her Christian humanising mission . The glass that was half empty was now seen as half-full.³ This is evident in NA, which begins with a most important point, that under God, all of us, all human beings, are brothers and sisters:

“One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. God’s providence, His manifestations of goodness and His saving design extend to everyone ...”

To see God as Father and Creator means to see humanity as God’s family.

Catholics view spirituality and religion as an intrinsic part of being human. One of the early fathers of the Church, St. Augustine, a late 4C North African Bishop, put it well: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁴ Every human being wants to be happy and the human heart is hard-wired to find this by responding to truth, goodness, beauty and love.⁵ As the *Catechism* says: “the desire for God is written in the human heart, because [we are] created by God and for God, and God never ceases to draw [us] to Himself”.⁶ Catholic Christians also believe, to use the words of John Donne, that “no man is an island entire of itself; every [one] is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”⁷ Besides the transcendent, vertical dimension of love, to be happy we also need ‘horizontal’ love. We need to belong to others, to love and to be loved. Jesus Himself said: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. [And] you must love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12: 30-31).

² See E. Hahnenberg *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati, Franciscan Media: 2007) 156-163

³ For more on this, see P. Egan *Philosophy and Catholic Theology. A Primer* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press: 2009) especially 66-73

⁴ Augustine *Confessions* Lib 1, 1-2, 2.5, 5 (CSEL 33, 1-5). This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the Ninth Sunday of the year.

⁵ This is a global summary and evaluation of Bernard Lonergan’s highly nuanced philosophy. For a brief overview, see B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 104-105. Lonergan begins that section by stating: “Man achieves authenticity in self-transcendence” (104 top).

⁶ *Catechism* 27.

⁷ See J. Donne *Meditation XVII*: available online at web.cs.dal.ca/~johnston/poetry/island.html (March 2015)

Nostra Aetate does not examine cultural, social and historical conflicts. It restricts itself to theology. With profound respect, it seeks to underline what we all have in common in order to invite friendship and dialogue. The most extensive section is that devoted to the relationship of Christianity and Judaism (NA 4); this concludes by citing St. Paul, that God does not take back the choice He has made and that we await that eternal day when all people will be one, serving God ‘shoulder to shoulder.’⁸ The section on Hinduism and Buddhism (NA 2) and the common links in spirituality with Christianity is briefer. But then NA discusses at greater length Islam (NA 3), noting how Muslims worship the one God, link their faith to Abraham, honour Jesus as a prophet, praising too His Virgin Mother. All the religions are treated positively: the “Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in [them]” (NA 2). Indeed, the Church sees itself as in a gradation of differing relationships with other traditions depending upon the level of commonality in doctrine, life and worship.⁹ This is why

“the Church urges her children to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with the members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, recognise, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, and their social life and culture” (NA 2).

NA carefully holds in tension proclamation and dialogue, and these two approaches hallmark an authentically Catholic engagement in interreligious collaboration. NA on the one hand reaffirms Christian missionary activity and the need to proclaim the Gospel, but on the other, encourages dialogue, since the other traditions “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people” (NA 2). Other Vatican documents extend this two-fold approach to all non-Catholic systems of thought, moral codes and belief, such as African traditional religions¹⁰, new age spiritualities,¹¹ agnosticism, atheism, non-believers and indeed, anyone seeking sincerely to follow their conscience.¹² Without denying on the one hand the Truth of Christ, nor on the other, an individual’s moral freedom to choose for or against, Catholic Christians believe God wants everyone to be saved, and that He has a relationship with every person on earth, in a manner ultimately known only to Him.¹³

Let us now turn to religion in the British context.

2. The British Religious and Cultural Context

Britain today is a hypermarket of religion. We inhabit a pluralist, secular democracy, and as subjects of Her Majesty the Queen, we enjoy extensive religious freedom. Yet,

⁸ Rom 11: 11-32, but especially vv. 28-29

⁹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 16-17

¹⁰ See H. Denzinger *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* ed. P. Hünermann (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2012) DH 5026

¹¹ See Pontifical Council for Culture and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age’* (Vatican, 2003)

¹² *Lumen Gentium* 6, cited in DH 4140

¹³ John Paul II *Dominum et Vivificantem* 53 - online at www.vatican.va (November 2017) citing *Gaudium et Spes* 22.

as people of religion, in this 21C we are also facing growing challenges to that freedom, especially to freedom of religious expression. In my lifetime, society has given the strong impression that religion has no place in a busy, modern life, and that where religion does appear, it can be the cause of problems, extremism, violence. Moreover, hardly a day goes by without the press reporting a collision between religion and today's so-called secular culture. Recent examples include the Christian owners of a Northern Ireland bakery, who lost their appeal against a High Court ruling that their refusal to make a cake, iced with the slogan "Support Gay Marriage," was discriminatory.¹⁴ Then there was the community nurse from 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.¹⁵ Some local councils regularly replace 'Christmas' with 'The Holiday Season' and one year, an Oxford council-funded charity referred to Christmas as the 'Winter Light Festival.'¹⁶ And only last week, Police Scotland brought in new safety regulations that will mean that any religious group holding a procession will face much red tape and a large bill.¹⁷

Yet curiously religion in Britain never seems far away. Since the events of 9/11, the world situation has changed considerably and the issue of religion has become a priority. Whilst here in the West, Christianity is in decline, in other parts of the world religion, including Christianity is in the ascendant. Islam is renewing its mission, as is Buddhism, seen in its new retreat centres in Scotland.¹⁸ Globalisation has made the world a smaller place; thanks to easier travel, the internet, business and instant communication, there is now greater contact between peoples and their religious viewpoints. Moreover, most Western countries have experienced substantial immigration, with a plurality of religions on everyone's doorstep. Today each part of Britain is thoroughly multicultural and potentially multi-religious.

The British religious situation, however, is complex. In the last Census, 59% of the population (3 in 5) identified as Christian¹⁹. Of these, most belong to the Anglican Church, 27M. Catholics number 5M, 7% of the general population. Muslims are the next largest group at 4.8%, then, in order Hindus (1.5%), Sikhs and Jews. 1 in 4 people (25% of the population) said they have no religion, although many surveys suggest the actual figure of 'nones' is much higher. But what complicates this picture is secularism, which is now so dominant that it makes being religious exceptional.²⁰

Secularism strictly separates Church and State, religion and politics. It's about living a life focused on this world. Secularism permits religion, but it marginalises and ring-

¹⁴ BBC News 24th October 2016: see www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-37748681 (November 2017)

¹⁵ BBC News 1st February 2009: see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7863699.stm (November 2017)

¹⁶ *The Daily Telegraph* 2nd November 2008: see www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3367390/Christmas-banned-in-Oxford-by-council-owned-charity.html (November 2017)

¹⁷ I. Dunne 'Corpus Christi processions under threat in Scotland after police ruling' *The Catholic Herald* (30th October 2017): see www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/10/30/corpus-christi-processions-under-threat-in-scotland-after-police-ruling/ (November 2017)

¹⁸ See, for example, the Dhanakosa Monastery founded in 1993 near Callander in the Highlands: www.dhanakosa.com (November 2017)

¹⁹ See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html (March 2014).

²⁰ As Charles Taylor puts it, in Western democracies all live under "regimes of secularism". See J. Maclure and C. Taylor *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (London, Harvard UP: 2011) 9f

fences it to the private sphere. In Britain, there is now an increasing number of hard-core secularists, such as the National Secular Society, who deride Christianity and seek systematically to exclude religious expression from schools, institutions and public life: not freedom *of* religion but freedom *from* religion. As Alasdair Campbell, one-time advisor to Tony Blair, said, “We don’t do God.”²¹

Paradoxically, secularism has emerged from a Christian world-view. Arguably it cannot exist without it. It is a deconstructed version of Christian morality, values disconnected from the religion that generated it, a form of post-Christian ethics that derives its vitality from the Christian patrimony still embedded in British culture. It even has its own set of ‘theological’ terms such as equality, diversity, freedom, respect, tolerance, non-discrimination, multiculturalism, social cohesion, ethnic communities, inclusivity, and so on. All these values are second-order values derived from Christianity, albeit disjoined from Christian doctrine and practice.

The growth of secularism in Britain has gone hand in hand with the decline of Christianity, which accelerated after the cultural, social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s with 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.²² The ‘Swinging Sixties’ ushered in the collapse of the traditional family and brought about new gender roles for women. Even so, it is argued that while practice has declined, Christian beliefs still remain.²³ They surface on public occasions, at royal weddings, and at funerals. Britain is still in many ways a society based on Christian ethics.²⁴ The British may be ‘unchurched,’ they say; they don’t belong, but they do still believe.

To me, the most worrying aspect of secularism is, to use Pope Benedict’s phrase, the ‘dictatorship of relativism’.²⁵ Relativism is the view that sees truth as relative: what is true for you may not be true for me. Your truth is not my truth. Because truth has no firm foundation in religion or the natural law, then everything depends on what I think or feel, and without a religious anchor or compass, virtues and values are determined by personal preference. The spectre of dictatorship arises when the State endorses one person’s or group’s claims over another. We can see this in all the recent debates over abortion, gay marriage, assisted suicide, and so on. What is right becomes what is

²¹ See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3301925.stm (March 2014). He made the comment in 2003 to a journalist interviewing the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who was about to ask the PM about his religious convictions.

²² C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001)

²³ G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994)

²⁴ G. Smith *A Short History of Secularism* (London, Tauris: 2010)

²⁵ In 2005, in a homily at Mass to the cardinals who had come to Rome to elect the new pope, the then Cardinal Ratzinger, said:

“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.”

See: 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 www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html (November 2017).

legal. Pope Benedict warned about a growing totalitarianism in European secular societies as the loss of faith dissolves the foundations of ethics.²⁶ The British legal system was moulded over many centuries by Christianity and by the natural law. Today it is crafted by lawmakers and politicians, educators and health-care professionals, pressure-groups and media, business and commercial interests, for whom those common, traditional values have less traction. Individuals and groups lobby for what seems to them expedient, but which can have damaging consequences for traditional values. The law is now increasingly adrift. It expresses the will of the legislator, the will of campaigners, the will of a focus group. It is becoming, in other words, a State-enforced relativism.²⁷

Extreme secularism, the loss of a secure foundation in faith and the dictatorship of relativism, means that Britain, indeed Western Europe as a whole, have no spiritual resources easily to turn to. It is a laudable desire to make space for minority religions, but surely it is *not* laudable for secularism to seek to erase the religion of the majority. The enforcement of secularist thinking is generating religious illiteracy.²⁸ People no longer have the basic knowledge to understand their own cultural heritage, let alone the cultural heritage of other traditions inspired by religion. Cut off from their own roots, young people, adrift with emptiness within, are exposed to the worst temptations. Once disaffected, is it any surprise that youngsters become radicalised, seeing violence as an outlet, a means of revenge on non-believers and infidels?²⁹

3. Towards a Greater Collaboration of Faiths and Religions

I'd like to finish this off by arguing that we people of religion, you and I, need one another. We need to collaborate more closely and more visibly. We need a richer dialogue between us, but more especially, we Christians need you of the other religions to help us rekindle faith and draw our country back to its Christian roots.

²⁶ Interestingly, on a visit to the Vatican in 2012, Baroness Warsi, 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 (March 2014).

²⁷ M. Nazir-Ali *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism* (London, Bloomsbury: 2012) 32.

²⁸ As an example, take the word ‘equality.’ In its 2013 document *Religion or Belief and the Workplace* the Equalities and Human Rights Commission fails to differentiate between religion on the one hand, and personal life-style choices on the other. This is typical of a secular approach, in which every religion and every choice is treated as absolutely identical of equal value. Consequently, vegetarianism, environmentalism, even wearing a beard, are equated with classic religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. This is not only an offence to those who are members of these religions, but it expresses an absolutist view of equality: that equality means sameness, not complementarity and difference. In the document, the religion of a tiny minority, Druidism, is valued identically with the religion of the majority, Christianity, and thus disproportionately. Yet, it is an historical fact that the core of British values are based not on Druidism, but on Christianity. See Equality and Human Rights Commission *Equality or Belief in the Workplace: An Explanation of Recent European Court of Human Rights Judgments* (2013) available on-line at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/religion-or-belief-workplace-explanation-recent-european-court-human-rights> (November 2017)

²⁹ See *Catholic World Report*: ‘Europe will be adrift if it loses Christian roots, faith leaders warn’ (March 3rd, 2017): www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/03/03/europe-will-be-adrift-if-it-loses-christian-roots-faith-leaders-warn (November 2017)

Secularism is too flimsy a basis. It cannot guarantee long term the advances the British people have achieved, the value placed on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation, respect for the rule of law, equality and the individual's rights and duties. Its marginalisation of religion, its amnesia of the past, its relativism that fosters harmful ideologies and leads to the victimization of the weak, its proven inability to support stable marriages and family life, its growing restriction on religious freedom, and its tendency towards greater surveillance and state-control, all suggest we need to find a new way forward if we are to create a stable and strong religiously pluralist but cohesive society.

In arguing for a religious resurgence, each of us will need to work at that within our own tradition. At the very least, we need to help our politicians and policy-makers overcome religious ignorance, enabling people more easily to get to know us, to appreciate our wisdom, vision and our values, and thus not to feel threatened by religion but welcome. I have three suggestions for this.

First of all, ourselves. As people for religion, we need to become better friends. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration is primarily about meeting people and developing friendships. We need to know each other well. We need to share things together. We need to trust each other more so that we can truly learn about what our religions and religious practices mean, what our places of worship are like, what we think about current affairs, and how we might work on the local level to make things better. This Forum is an excellent example of this.

Secondly, environmentalism. Many people in British society, people of all religions and none, are ever more concerned about the damage modern lifestyles are causing to the environment in which we live, and also the disorder these lifestyles can bring into families and human relations. As people of religion, we all believe, each in our own way, that the Earth is holy. It is a Divine work to be treated with respect. In this sense, environmentalism is a good ground for interreligious dialogue and an area of concern that enables us to engage with and work alongside nonreligious people.

And thirdly, we need to pray. All of us here are people of religion, faith and spirituality. Each in our own way, we believe in the Divine, that every human is called to serve Him and to find in Him their happiness. It is our task to witness to this, so that those who say they have no religion, those who say they are not sure, those who are lost or on the margins, can find their way home to Him. Together, we have a crucial task in society, a service to those who are religiously, spiritually and morally adrift, a contribution to the well-being and future of our society.

Conclusion

I'd like to end by once again thanking you for inviting me to speak. I have tried to underline the commitment of especially Catholic Christians to interreligious

collaboration. I have also spoken about the challenge of secularism and how working together we might find some ways forward. Let me end with the words of our current holy father, Pope Francis. Last November in a meeting with Representatives of Religions, he said this:

“Sadly, not a day goes by when we do not hear of acts of violence, conflict, kidnapping, terrorist attacks, killings and destruction. It is horrible that at times, to justify such barbarism, the name of a religion, or the name of God Himself is invoked. May there be clear condemnation of these iniquitous attitudes that profane the name of God and sully the religious quest of mankind. Instead, may there be fostered everywhere the peaceful encounter of believers and genuine religious freedom. Here, our responsibility before God, humanity and the future is great; it calls for unremitting effort... It is a call that challenges us, a path to be taken together, for the good of all, and with hope. May the religions be doors of hope helping to penetrate the walls erected by pride and fear. May they be wombs of life, bearing the merciful love of God to a wounded and needy humanity.”³⁰

Thank you for listening!

³⁰ Pope Francis ‘Address to Representatives of Different Religions’ (3rd November 2016): see w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161103_udienza-interreligiosa.html (November 2017)