



RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN A GLOBAL AGE

Society, Democracy and Foreign Policy



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Report by Mr Richard Rouse, Official of the Pontifical Council for Culture

The departure of Pope Benedict XVI from his office for the last time on the evening of the 28th of February 2013 also left the Pontifical Council for Culture bereft of its President, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. Nevertheless the ordinary activity of the Dicastery continued just a few hours later with the long-planned for academic conference “Religion and Secularism in a Global Age: Society, Democracy and Foreign Policy” organised by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation at the Pontifical Gregorian University on the 1st of March, with the support of the British Embassy to the Holy See and partnerships from the American University of Rome and the Pontifical Council for Culture with its Courtyard of the Gentiles. While the media circus on *via della conciliazione* caused the organisers to downplay its publicity and the immediate public outreach angle of this event, there was nothing minor about the speakers who, as key players in their own fields, brought to the table those prominent themes which form part of what Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi in his message to the conference called that “dialogue between the complementary secular and religious intellectual traditions [which is] today so vital for all our societies.”

The morning session began with some broad remarks by Dr Ian Linden, Policy Director of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation explaining the conference’s intercultural approach to the role of religion in a time of globalisation and the two-way impact of the secular on religions and of faith on society. He drew helpfully on Rowan Williams, the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury and his distinctions between the concepts of procedural secularism (where States have a neutral distance) and programmatic or proscriptive secularism (where alienation is pursued). And he outlined the scope of the meeting in raising governance, legal, educational and political issues on the religious question at a time in which academia has a Taylorian reading of secularisation as a process of continuous reformulations of religious life and yet pursues a value-neutral approach to the emergence of the religious question, as a sort of universal idea under a variety of cultural manifestations (religions as they are often called). At the heart of the matter is the value religions bring to society and how they engage with each other, for example in the Western narrative with a rights-centred approach aimed at contributing to the common good in the flux of contemporary legislative trends.

States, Rights and Duties

Thus the opening talk entered into the fray with an analysis of the protection and promotion of human rights for minority groups in the multicultural experience of Canada, concentrating on Rawlsian secular public liberalism. Professor Daniel Cere, from the Department of Religious Studies at McGill University, gave an overview of how Canada, particularly under the influence of Pierre Trudeau, is developing its regulatory practices in light of the changing public understanding of marriage with a talk on religious minorities and human rights. For many Western societies – and here the lesson is implicit for emerging cultures – the symbol of liberalism was sexual freedom. Whereas Pierre Trudeau’s famous one-liner “keep the state out of the bedroom” may once have had an appeal, the trends of the liberal sexual ethic have brought new questions of abuse of power and an intensification of moral concerns due to the failure of the value-neutral civic discourse to protect the weak; political liberalism demands sexual pluralism, but this involves some exclusion, for example the exclusion of childrens’ rights. Despite the obvious difficulty the Church has in obtaining credibility in this sphere due to the sins of some of its sons, the moral outcry concerning paedophilia has led society to rediscover some notion of moral norms. And so the question is asked, what place does faith-based talk on sexual rights have in a liberal democracy? Is it to limit itself to just another rights argument – promoting the right of conscience, or the birth rights of children? Or may it promote a richer concept of humanity and the common good?

Respondent to this first paper was Fr Gerry Whelan, SJ, an expert on Lonergan who focused on the fundamental question of the difference between choice and nature. We have witnessed a shift from child as subject of rights to child as object of rights, as individual rights have taken precedence in public discourse, but even this is not the full picture. Fifty years on from the Second Vatican Council, the decree *Dignitatis Humanae* and the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* are still often seen as the symbolic moments by which human rights discourse was appropriated by the Church in a political volte-face, a move desired as an engagement with rights culture, but which seemingly opened the door to relativism, apostasy and pluralism and an abandonment of a fuller humanism. Coming so close in time to the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights – what Mr Linden called the best secular attempt at defining human wellbeing – and due to an excessive de-rooting of rights from the natural law theories, even from the interpretations given even by a John Courtney Murray or Pierre Trudeau, public discourse has been left focused on individual rights, deprived not only of family, group and community rights, but also any sense of being embedded in a natural law, of which rights are but a positive expression. It is the old battle: seemingly paternalistic natural law against the new deity, autonomy. A Catholic response, which Daniel Cere himself advocated, would have to overcome the limitation of seeing rights in the individualised a-value sense and journeying “beyond emotion”, through the virtue rights talk (MacIntyre) to contrast these – as John Paul II did so well – with a new Christian personalism built on the first of all human rights, religious freedom, together with an emphasis on an anthropology which leaves room for love, responsibility, gift and personhood, and also a rediscovery of the family and the community. The increasing State tendency to intervene not to reflect culture (itself a transient category) but with a desire to shape culture requires a robust Catholic presence that is as truthful as it is credible, lest the Church cease to be a spokesperson for the universalist narrative (as Paul VI called her, “expert in humanity”) to being a beggar of rights.

The second paper, by Prof Ian Leigh, Professor of Law at Durham Law School in the United Kingdom, moved us into sphere of the European Court on Human Rights whose judgements currently affect some 48 countries and some 800 million souls. His analysis of the emerging jurisprudential trends helped us go beyond the headline examples of the minarets in Switzerland, Islamic headscarves in French state schools, and Crucifixes in Italian classrooms. Behind these sometimes seemingly contradicting decisions there lies a progressive jurisprudential praxis which has moved well beyond defending the freedom of religion from coercion by means of other rights such as those of conscience or free speech, to the emergence of trends that have been labelled as the promotion of pluralism, of secularist or preferential treatment of minorities other than Christian. In fact the question is much more delicate than the categories of hostility or neutrality, or even respect, strict equality and equidistance. Currently predominating is the *doctrine of a margin of*

appreciation which allows States to have their own customs that can look favourably on the contribution of religious question. But once the legal structures allow States to interfere in a promotional sense on the culture, perhaps to overcome monopolistic privileges, it is a short step to intervening in internal religious law – such as deciding on the basis of equal opportunities regulation that Church structures should be excluded from state funding, for example for adoption, or even deciding who can preside at weddings. If there was formerly an impartial approach which permitted no value judgements by State officials, and then a stance of equidistance and equality of treatment, now there is the trend to positive discrimination. What was particularly fascinating was seeing how this jurisprudential tradition *in fieri* often uses prudential avoidance tactics during this transitional phase as different European countries continue to seek to align themselves under a common legal code. As a system that responds to individual cases, it is opportunistic, and will not always be able to resist redefining religious community concepts. Again the Respondent, this time Fr Rocco d’Ambrosio SJ appealed to philosophical categories to counter the “is” with the “ought”, the “may I” with the “should I” in a legal system veering towards legal positivism. At the same time he highlighted the difficulty for the religious to deprive themselves of their emotional aspects and limit themselves to the civic, merely lay societal arguments. Aware of the nature of fundamentalists who seek to impose their own visions he appealed particularly to St Augustine’s *City of God* writings and the need for Catholics to be double citizens. A status that is reinforced when following the teaching of *Gaudium et spes* which calls for Christians to seek *with others* a solution to the social issues, for the Church and the political spheres are autonomous but work together for the common good (*Gaudium et Spes* 76).

An intercultural exchange of visions

The afternoon session began with some words of welcome from the Rector of the Gregorian University, Fr François-Xavier Dumortier, S.J. who picked up on the complementary relations between faith and culture as expressed in Pope Benedict XVI’s address in Westminster Hall, with its accent on the dialogue between Faith and Reason. The various talks in the afternoon then had the format of the rational dialogue model of the Courtyard of the Gentiles, with a conversational style touching on a number of issues in a provocative but non-judgemental manner to stimulate reflection and conversation. Under the moderation of the British Ambassador to the Holy See, H.E. Mr Nigel Baker, this provided a good overview of the variety of approaches and appeals to the religious question in the political and religious settings in emerging nations and cultures. Prof. Rajeev Bhargava from the University of Delhi, India asked what the Indian experience could teach the West in terms of governing the religious question. The starting point is an entirely different history and so perspective. The frame of reference is not of religious freedom, but ensuring the conviviality of religious diversity with the key trend being government intervention to resolve questions of religious dominance. This is not benign management, but positive discrimination, what some might call interference. Hence the government has outlawed certain discriminatory practices against the untouchables (opening temples to all etc.) and ensured that formal recognition is given to families, schools and communities, even providing organisational support for pilgrimages, or ensuring that the holy days of one religion are respected by all by making them national holidays. His major challenge, however, came with his promotion of pro-fluid cultic identity, thus relieving religions from their status as exclusive category. In such a post-categorical identity, people would be released from social structures and have greater freedom in their cultic religiosity and such a vision would foresee the possibility of being a “Muslim Christian” or a “Hindu Sufi”. He asserted that this is India’s way of removing dominance trends and returning to a pre-colonial paradise. Diplomatically put, this proposal raised not a few religious and political eyebrows.

Olivier Roy, Professor of Social and Political Theory at the European University Institute, Dr Amel Boubekeur, Visiting Fellow at Brookings Doha Centre, Qatar, and Prof Hakan Yilmaz, Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Bogaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey followed suit challenging the many preconceptions we have about Islam while providing culture as the hermeneutical key for a propitious understanding and

engagement. There is no prescinding from religious and cultural identity, and any attempt at multiculturalism which proposes deculturation turns out in fact to be anticultural, destroying the realism that religions have had to embrace and opening the door to fundamentalism. Some common presumptions were challenged and light was thrown on a range of movements, including the political diversity within Islam, a religious community which is – and this was clearly asserted – capable of living the Two Cities theory. Misconceptions concerning the uprisings in the Arab world and the role of Islamic political groups as corporate bodies able to promote processes and create culture in realist context at the same time as the lack of an Islamic culture of governance were also considered. It was commented that the difficulties currently faced are substantially political as there is a disconnect between domination and vision and political consensus, as authoritarianism has given way, but vehicles of trust are not yet matured. The call to the West, then, in conclusion, was to engage not just with political or religious leaders, but with the community as a whole, with good management of the desire and needs of social and economic justice in order that the overthrowing of the dominative systems be a replaced by a stable system of governance in which the religious question, harnessed with intercultural dialogue, is of service to humanity.

THE SPEAKERS

Speakers' Biographies



The biographies section features a grid of 12 small portraits, each accompanied by a short text block. The text is too small to read clearly but appears to list names and titles of the speakers. The layout is organized in two columns and six rows.

PRESENTATION FOLLOW UP

A variety of follow up to the meeting is planned and is in the capable hands of the main organisers The Tony Blair Faith Foundation, including an eventual publication of the Acts.

For now we make available here:

The Blog Posting of the British Ambassador to the Holy See, Mr Nigel Baker

