

CONCERNING SECULARISM

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Peter Cullinane

INTRODUCTION; EVANGELIZING IN A SECULAR SOCIETY:

Our topic matters, because vibrant Christian communities do not limit their concerns to what is familiar, in-house and routine. They want to reach into a society that is often unsympathetic, and more often indifferent. This paper looks at some of the ways secularism impacts on our churches' core task of evangelizing – and how religious people themselves sometimes contribute to agnosticism's doubts and secularism's indifference.

I am taking the purpose of evangelization to mean much more than individual sanctification. It includes that transformation of human life and human society that results from our life "in Christ". Our very relationship with Christ commits us to being "for others". In the Catholic tradition this is focused especially in the Eucharist: receiving Christ under the sacramental signs of bread and wine, we personally identify with the One whose body and blood were given up and poured out *for others*. According to Pope John Paul II, "our concern for others... is the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged".

This reaching out to others focuses on all aspects of life - social, political and economic. When this outreach fails, we have that split which the Second Vatican Council referred to in this way:

"The split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our time" (Constitution on Church in Modern World, 43).

Our failure to prevent that split scandalizes, which is why the Council could also claim that we Christians must accept some responsibility for modern atheism (ibid. 19).

At times the Christian Churches justifiably critique specific aspects of social, political and economic life over against the Gospel. But I think we need to go to a deeper level, and look more closely at the underlying culture out of which we consciously and unconsciously do our thinking about social, political and economic issues: the mindsets, assumptions, inherited values and disvalues, prejudices etc that influence our thinking. "What matters is to evangelize human culture and cultures, not in a purely decorative way... but in a vital way, in depth and to their roots..." (Pope Paul VI, Letter on Evangelization 20),

"affecting, and as it were upsetting, through the power of the gospel, humankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, wherever these are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation." (Ibid. 19)

So, how does this apply to secularism? Does it make any difference whether faith is or is not part of one's mindset or culture when addressing social, political and economic issues? And what further difference might we expect as more people profess "no religion" and fewer profess religious faith"?

During my last ad limina visit with Pope Benedict XVI, I had made some wise remarks about the need for inculturation! I could not hear Benedict's reply, so I just smiled agreeably. It wasn't until later, when the other bishops asked me why I had not replied that I realized he had asked me: "how do you inculturate the Gospel in secular culture?" I would not have known what to say even if I had heard the question! Perhaps I could have said: "wait until I have talked about it with the Methodists."

THE PLAGUE OF OUR TIMES – SUPERFICIALITY

The Second Vatican Council noted that because progress in the sciences and technology focuses so predominantly on observable data, we can easily start to assume that what cannot be known by the sciences cannot be known at all. We begin to think we are sufficient to ourselves, and "no longer seek any higher realities" (Church in Modern World, 57)

For some, e.g. the Humanist Society of NZ, not to look for any higher realities is an ideological commitment to holding that there is no reality beyond what can be scientifically observed (never mind that some of the conditions necessary for doing science, and doing it responsibly, are not entirely within the scope of scientific analysis – e.g. personal intentions and integrity, commitment to truth, freedom, values, ideas, compassion, love...). For most people, however, 'not looking' for any higher realities is not ideological; it is more a matter of practical neglect – and superficial thinking and living.

Confucius, Buddha, Mohamed, the Hebrew prophets all emphasized the need for wisdom. But something is amiss today. It has been asked: "whatever happened to wisdom that it got lost in knowledge; and whatever happened to knowledge that it got lost in information?" I think the pervasiveness of individualism in our culture has much to do with it. After all, Wisdom is enshrined in community, past & present; it presupposes that "no one is an island". Knowledge is also collective; it presupposes historical awareness; ability to synthesize; it builds up understanding; Information on its own is essentially fragmented – so too will be lives that look only to be gratified by information.

The transformation of information into knowledge and wisdom is a process; it needs time, experience; stillness, careful thought... It is jeopardized by busyness and noise. Not moving beyond information to knowledge and wisdom makes for a mindset that is fragmented and individualistic, easily impressed, and vulnerable to spin (both commercial & political.)

Speaking of gains from recent social changes in Britain, Prof. Ian Bradley (St Andrews) says these changes make more room for spirituality, the mystical, the visual, more joy, more diversity... and that's good. Nevertheless, he says: "something has gone with the demise of restraint, reserve, seriousness, thrift, temperance and rationalism." In our own country, even TV news, and safety information, have to be presented in the genre of entertainment to get people's attention. Of course, the process of dumbing down is a vicious circle. Prof. Jordan Peterson (Toronto) speaks of "a glib, juvenile search for happiness that has bewitched modern culture".

Celebrities, glitter, banality, consumerism can be a cover for emptiness. It is hardly mere coincidence that people who trivialize the sacred end up idolizing the trivial. Living on the surface of things, they are less likely to notice "the extraordinary side of the ordinary" (John Paul II) or "the presence of the ultimate in the commonplace" (Abraham Heschel). I often think chapter 13 of the Book of Wisdom is not just for "unbelievers" but also for sleep-walkers, which is most of us most of the time!

SECULARIZATION AND SECULARISM

The progression from pre-scientific to scientific thinking, with all the benefits this has brought, owes much to our Abrahamic faith. Animist religions regarded the world as the abode of gods, demiurges & demons, where people had to tip-toe around in fear of breaching some taboo, and never being sure of having appeased vengeful gods. This hardly left much room for human creativity, human responsibility for the planet, the development of the sciences, or even human rights. Humanity needed to discover that there is one God, who loves us greatly, wants us to enjoy the world, and harness its energies, and know that God is not offended by that. The Hebrew scriptures record how an embattled, struggling people experienced that assurance through knowing God's transcendence.

Using methods of thought developed by Aristotle and introduced to the West by mainly Muslim scholars, medieval Christian theologians built upon this biblical insight, showing that the world is not a place where we need fear to tread; all of it is secular. The liberation of secular reality to be its secular self – *secularization* - and respect for the proper autonomy of the sciences, owe much to the faith that came down from Abraham.

Secularism, (as I am using the term here) is another matter. Not to know God is not to know how greatly we are loved. The Hebrew people knew God through their experience of a love they knew they had not merited or deserved, and was not owing to them. This is what they were being taught by their history of failure. New Testament writers would emphasize that *our* experience of failure and sin also puts into relief God's unmerited, undeserved mercy, and salvation as pure gift. This was the point of all history, including the history of the Christian church! The wonder of ourselves is revealed in the wonder of God's gratuitous mercy.

Secularism (even when it is lived in more or less good faith) represents a huge deprivation, because when people don't know how greatly they are loved by God, they don't know how greatly they matter – or even whether they matter at all.

Yet, is there anything we need to know more than this? After all, life "isn't fair"; it can take away those nearest and dearest to us; people can find themselves trapped in impossible situations; humans still commit terrible atrocities against one another... In that kind of world people need a reason for hope that stands beyond the reach of every disaster, - not an assurance things will turn out right, but that ultimately "all will be well" even when they don't! This is what people are deprived of if they have no reason for hope beyond what this world can offer. And they remain less than "fully alive". This kind of secularism has rightly been called "reductionist secularism".

Moreover, when God is excluded, even secular reality is diminished: it is no longer seen as a revelation of God's purposes, and to be respected. To believers, the cosmos is not just a quarry. It is the place where God's love for us and our love for God become tangible. Just by being that, secular reality is holy! Animism's instinct was right; its interpretation of that instinct needed to be corrected by historic revelation.

RE-EVANGELIZING THE CHURCH

We rightly credit Judeo-Christian faith with its contribution to human and scientific progress. But the descendants of Abraham (Jews, Muslims & Christians) must also accept some responsibility for agnosticism's doubts and secularism's indifference (see Const. on Church in Modern World, 19).

If I had another chance to answer Pope Benedict's question, I would say that evangelizing, like charity, begins at home. Inculturation in a secular society includes putting into practice virtues which that society accepts and that are acceptable to ourselves. Western secular society accepts the need for equality, inclusiveness, participation, consultation, dialogue, human dignity, rightful autonomy etc. - at least in theory. So does the Second Vatican Council. But in contrast to this, the image projected by clericalism suggests elitism, power and privilege. This discredits the Gospel.

Clericalism has ancient roots. It started when Christian apologists of 3rd & 4th centuries drew on Old Testament imagery to depict Christian ministry, which up until then was more evangelical. Then, in 11th century, Pope Gregory VII tried to extricate the Church from an unhealthy dependence on emperors and secular powers, by claiming for the Church a kind of separate jurisdiction. This gradually led to the Church isolating itself in a kind of spiritual realm, while the world went its own way, culminating in a post- Enlightenment sense of not needing the Church. This left the Church ill-equipped to cope with, benefit from, or contribute to, Modernity. Worse still, it produced a sense of not being accountable – hierarchy to laity or Church to society – which sometimes resulted in putting the Church's perceived interests ahead of the rights of victims of injustices committed by Church members. More scope for participation by lay men and women in Church governance and management is needed to break clericalism down.

When people's experience of the Church carries a sense of alienation from their own rightful aspirations, they easily come to the conclusion that the Church a pious option; it is there "for those who need it". Or, they become part of a growing gap between Christian faith which is rooted in the historic events of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and "spiritualities" that are not consciously connected to those historic events at all.

There are other ways we can impair the Gospel's credibility – e.g.

- by too easily living with that "split" between our faith and our lives and business practices;
- by our disunity – with or without sectarian strife;
- by a religious fundamentalism that interprets our holy books unscientifically.
- by versions of religiosity that are 'lite' and unsatisfying.
- by practices that in any way 'diminish' God; e.g. pious practices which imply that we need to earn God's love; practices which suppose that we can put God in our debt; claims that would put a limit on God's presence or love or mercy; etc.

Religion that presents a diminished God is a diminished religion, and cannot satisfy hearts that are made for the Infinite God. Anything we can earn or manage or arrange ultimately can never satisfy our thirst for the infinite. And walking away from what doesn't satisfy won't feel like any big deal.

Is this what we already see in dwindling church attendance? And is this what Rahner meant years ago when he predicted that tomorrow one will either be a mystic/contemplative or will not be a Christian at all?

SYMPTOMS OF REDUCTIONIST SECULARISM

Whatever about the Church's sins, the demise of religious commitment has hardly brought about an improvement. According to a report in the *Sunday Star Times* (Nov. 24 2013), the Department of Internal Affairs had blocked 34 million attempts within New Zealand, over three years, to access child

sex abuse sites; New Zealanders seeking child pornography were increasingly demanding younger children and more violent abuse; and globally abuse is becoming more and more degrading.

Society doesn't seem to notice its own contradictions, or even make connections: e.g. we condemn sexual abuse, but treat pornography as a bit of a giggle; we deplore domestic violence, but serve up violence on the media as a form of entertainment. We ignore the dynamics of addiction, and those who are not practised in self-restraint eventually go to any lengths to get what they want. We have become the kind of society in which it is easier to commit abuse without feeling shame, and to boast about it on social media. Victims are perceived as objects, not as persons made "in the image of God".

In recent years the Department of Labour has uncovered widespread exploitation of vulnerable workers (migrants and young people) and fraud by employers. Suppressing conscience goes with suppressing God. It is commonly held that the sole function of business is to maximize profits, it being someone else's responsibility to take care of the social consequences. And so, jobs can be eliminated and livelihoods threatened for no other reason, ultimately, than to increase profits, even if they are already huge. Workers are seen mainly as cost items, and targets for cost-cutting; disposable. Variations of this practice are even considered normal, acceptable, and simply good business – even by some who profess religious faith. But they contradict their faith, because persons made "in the likeness of God" may not to be treated as we would treat goods and chattels.

If it has been misguided on the part of any faith to try to co-opt the State to its own confessional interests, it is now equally misguided on the part of the State to make secularism's confessional interests its own. The practical exclusion of God from the public domain is not a non-partisan stance. The State's responsibility is to promote the common good by allowing for the beneficial effects of any cultural vision: secularism is only one. The State is properly secular when it does not endorse reductionist secularism's indifference or antipathy to religion, under the guise of neutrality.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S WAY OF LOVING

Loving ourselves and one another and our world in the way God loves is necessarily counter-cultural in a society that commonly ignores God. For example, our secular culture is often very punitive, unforgiving, not open to new starts or reconciliation. In that kind of society, love that is gratuitous, faithful, forgiving, unconditional, unending, life-giving and a source of joy is a circuit breaker, simply by not being trapped within the cycle of getting even, or pay-back, or measuring just deserts, or limited to what is fair and reasonable.

It is no coincidence that the virtue most absent from the pre-Christian world – and the post-Christian world! - is compassion. And no coincidence that the virtue most distinctly Christian is compassion.

Judeo-Christian faith gives us a reason for taking mercy, compassion, and forbearance into social, political and economic life and planning. This is the polar opposite of usual assumption that "the business of business is business". For us, the business of business is *people* – "he tangata, he tangata, he tangata" - and the wider agenda of "making human life more human" (John Paul II). Catholic social teaching is quite specific. For example:

- the well-being of workers, families, and livelihoods have to be *factored into* economic planning. That's different from giving market forces free reign and then trying to redress the imbalances afterwards.

- Trading relationships, industrial law, commercial practices must make room for what Pope Benedict called “gratuitousness”, - compassion, giving and forgiving factored in; (*On Integral Human Development*.) Leaving something on fruit trees and vines was a way of factoring in the needs of “the exile, widow, orphan...” (Deuteronomy 24:10-22)
- Similarly, it is no longer possible to pursue justice, nationally or internationally, without factoring in the needs of the world’s poor. They must be included as of right, not merely as recipients of “charity”; they are entitled to be participants in the economies of the world - a world that belongs to every human being before parts of it belong more to some; national boundaries are not absolute.
- Nor can we speak of a “right” to have a child – because a child can only be a gift (not a commodity, or possession, or owed to anyone... and not a laboratory manufactured product.) Nor is there any supposed right to adopt based on the wants of adults in circumstances that conflict with the natural needs and rights of children, etc.

Judeo-Christian belief that every person is made in God’s image, personally chosen and called into existence by God, provides a basis for re-discovering the sheer wonder of each person, as nothing else can. And this is the most radical basis for transforming all our thinking about social, political and economic issues, and enabling the gospel to be a leaven in society.

“WHEN WE ARE WEAK....”

Crises facing the church (and here I speak mainly of the Catholic Church) will have served us well by bringing us to the experience of weakness in which God’s power works best. Even in the best circumstances the Gospel will always be a stumbling block and folly. A watered down Gospel is not the Gospel. We also remember St Paul’s warning that our battle is with “principalities and powers”. Jesus found himself confounded by lack of faith among his own kin, “and could work no miracle there” (Mark 6:1-6). We can share his grief when we are confronted by sluggishness, complacency or indifference among our people. We “suffer with” parishioners who share their grief over children or grand-children who were brought up in the faith but no longer practise it – yet seem to be living good lives, and even generously involved in works of charity, justice, peace. We feel the frustration of those who tell us they feel disconnected from, un-nurtured by, alienated by, or marginalized within, the Church.

Thirty years ago, when the Catholic Church was beginning to feel the pinch of insufficient vocations to ordained ministry, Cardinal Godfried Danneels had this to say:

Not for the first time in the history of the Church, God has forced his people into exile one way or another. The most famous exile in the Bible is that of the rivers of Babylon where the Jews had been deported... It was a sort of iconic exile in which we can read what any kind of exile entails and implies. It represented a time of God’s extreme benevolence and tenderness toward his people. I am convinced that God looks upon us with that same tenderness ...

The first thing the Jews said, according to the prophet Daniel, was, “Lord, we have no temples, no kings, no holy city, no synagogue, no schools, no offerings, no sacrifices, no priests, no rabbis... All we have is a humble and contrite heart.” I am sure that 40 years ago, we were totally convinced, although one ever said it, of our ability to arrange, organize the Church to our liking by our efforts alone. And if they had asked us we would obviously have replied: “No, it is the work of the Lord.” But, in a way, that was just the

theory. Deep down, we were saying: “We have many priests, many workers, a certain degree of influence, a certain degree of power, prestige, means....We had allowed ourselves to think we were able to construct the Church. Now we are learning slowly and wearily that we are not capable at all....

Now we are leaning to live in a state of dependency, learning progressively and with difficulty to forgo the myth of spiritual and ecclesiastical self-sufficiency. We are learning anew what theology had already taught us as totally abstract theory, situated somewhere in the history of the fourth and fifth centuries at the time of St Augustine’s debate on grace. We were Pelagians after all.

Exile is also the time of God’s tenderness. The most beautiful passages of Isaiah on the maternity of God were written in exile. Israel, at the height of its power and with Jerusalem never so glorious, proved unable to understand that God is teaching us to walk, just as a mother teaches her child to take its first steps. God was only conceivable as a valiant warrior at the head of his army but certainly not as a mother...

We have arrived at this moment which may well be hard but we need not think of a misfortune. For we have arrived at the time of humility, of dependence, of omnipotent grace, of God’s tenderness, or the patience of giving birth, or suffering...”

The Hound of Heaven has ways of reaching people who want to run from us! But the only language we have for sharing the Gospel is the community in which the Gospel is embodied – in its scriptures, prayer life, lives of holiness and witness to Christian faith, hope and love. What others see and hear in us counts. Hence the on-going need for renewal. The signs of this are already among us. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, many today are looking for a more personal experience of Christian community, prayer that is more scripture-based, and contemplative, Christian unity, support for counter-cultural living in our secular society, commitment to social justice, inclusiveness, participation, co-responsibility, consultation and dialogue, - and, in the midst of all this, the experience of mystery, not a ‘lite’ religion they would feel able to do without. Ultimately, “the mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory.” (Col. 2:7)

Finally, people need to see a connection between their present lives and their eternal future. This has been beautifully expressed by the Second Vatican Council: “all the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured”.¹ In other words, nothing dear to us in our present lives is ever lost – the precious moments, loving encounters, wonderful friendships, works of beauty, smiles and joys... This is not a “wait for after” solution to problems that are now. It is a way of saying that an assured and wonderful outcome makes *our present lives* more wonderful and more worthwhile. In fact, if there were no assured and wonderful outcome – then, what would be the point of now? It seems that Western secularism is also a form of misguided self-sufficiency.

CAN WE START AGAIN, PLEASE?

In different ways, secularism and some Christians have made false claims to self-sufficiency. Perhaps in this there is common ground for humility. But perhaps believers and ‘unbelievers’ might find more common ground by both taking more seriously what the sciences tell us. What might happen if neither thought of Heaven as being “up there” and God “out there”? And if both addressed the same question: what does it take to be fully human and fully alive?

The sciences tell us the universe started billions of years ago with the “big bang” and has been evolving ever since. It started as gases, which later became the physical components of the planets. Less than

four billion years ago life emerged, and later still, consciousness – “the capacity to ask questions, to distinguish between right and wrong, to aim for beauty...”ⁱⁱ That’s us! In us, the universe itself has reached consciousness. We don’t merely live “on” the planet, as if on a stage; we are “of” the planet – “from the clay of the ground” (Genesis 2:7), yet each unique, eternally chosen, and personally called into existence – with the planet. Then, somewhere between two and three thousand years ago, “a new wave of consciousness began to make sharper distinctions than ever before between a right way and a wrong way to live, think, act, work and pray.”ⁱⁱⁱ Religious consciousness, too, emerged as part of the universe’s evolution.

To religion the inaccessible, comprehensive, and unsettling reality of rightness is the ultimate reason why humans seek truth, why we have a sense of obligation, and why we long restlessly for perfect beauty. In our intellectual, moral and aesthetic experience we all, at least tacitly, anticipate rightness – even when we deny it. This becomes obvious whenever we catch ourselves in the act of looking for right understanding, right action, and right satisfaction. Even ordinary human consciousness is inseparable from a tasting of rightness.

In religion, however, the tasting intensifies to the point of savoring. In religion, people become explicitly and thankfully aware of the reality of rightness. Religion is a gradual but grateful awakening to the elusive horizon of unrestricted being, goodness, truth and beauty...

Without a profound sense that there exists, already and forever, an indestructible rightness toward which the universe is turning, our sense of meaning, truth, goodness, and beauty would be groundless. Without a sense, however, that our own lives along with the whole cosmic process can contribute something new and indispensable to the “realizing” of rightness, these same lives – and the whole cosmic story – would lack significance. Apart from the reality of indestructible rightness we would have no good reason to protest the wrongness in our lives, in the natural world, in human societies, and in religion too...

Because rightness is not already realized, moreover, there is inevitably an opening in the fabric of an unfinished universe not only for increasing growth but also for darkness and shadows, including in religion...^{iv}

So what we have got so far is a work in progress, marked by huge qualitative leaps, - each one “already implicit in the physical properties of the early universe.”^v But this evolution is still unfinished and still liable to falter. Not all the bits move at the same pace - not even human beings on the journey to becoming more authentically human.

Moreover, “unrestricted being, goodness, truth and beauty” does not require the existence of lesser perfection. So the cosmos does not exist out of necessity. It need never have existed. It comes out of a choice that was freely made. To realize this shocking truth about ourselves is to “see” in a way that becomes a different way of being: we *shift* from taking the world and our lives for granted (as if ours by some kind of right) to accepting our world and our lives as *gift*, and therefore living gratefully. This is religious consciousness. The Giver we call God, and the “shift” we call conversion. It is that way of seeing which makes us “fully alive” (Iraeus.)

Taking life for granted, as if there were no one to thank, is what so easily devolves into grasping and greedy living. Just as trashing nature and walking over people go hand in hand, so too do social justice and responsibility for the natural environment.

Conversion is also on-going. We know from experience that personal failure and struggle are involved in this process. Christians believe creation is in travail, in an ongoing struggle to be born - an unfinished

journey to becoming what it is going to be – through union with the Risen Christ. In Christ, creation is already made new, and belonging to Him we belong to it.^{vi} Our unfinished yearning for understanding, belonging, beauty, goodness and truth are intimations of what we are made for – a universe made new, to which we will always belong.

This “new creation” will always be God’s accomplishment. But God works *in and through us*, enabling us to participate in what God is doing. And so our personal expressions of love and goodness and justice contribute to what the fully redeemed universe will look like. No personal sacrifice for what is good or true or right or beautiful will be wasted.

The “purpose” of the universe... is that of awakening – especially by way of life, mind and religion – to rightness, [truth, goodness and beauty]. And the purpose of our own personal lives is to augment this awakening. Subjectivity, then, *is* the universe in the state of opening itself to the implantation of meaning. And religion is the universe in the state of grateful awakening to the dawning of rightness.”^{vii}

ⁱ *Gaudium et Spes*, n 39

ⁱⁱ John Haught *The New Cosmic Story* p. 16

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p 12

^{iv} *Ibid.* pp29-30

^v *Ibid.* p 16

^{vi} Paul to Romans, ch. 8.

^{vii} Haught p. 132