

CONCERNING SECULARISM

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PART I AN ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION; ITS RELATIONSHIP TO EVANGELISING:

There must be many different ways the subject of secularism can be approached. In this paper I have chosen to reflect on it from the perspective of *how it impacts on our churches' core task of evangelizing – and how religious people themselves can share responsibility for agnosticism's doubts and secularism's indifference.*

I am taking evangelization to include 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.

"By our mutual love, and in particular by our concern for those in need, we will be recognized as true followers of Christ, and this will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged". (Pope John Paul II.)

"A Eucharist that does not pass over into concrete practice in life is intrinsically fragmented." (Pope Benedict XVI)

This reaching out to others focuses on all aspects of social, political and economic life. 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).

There will be times when the Christian Churches justifiably critique 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"?

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 wholly within the scope of scientific analysis – e.g. personal intentions and integrity, commitment to truth, freedom, values, ideas, compassion, love...). For many, however, 'not looking' for any higher realities is more a matter of practical neglect – not unrelated to superficiality.

Healthy social, political and economic life requires much more than just information: it requires wisdom. Confucius, Buddha, Mohamed, the Hebrew prophets all emphasized this.

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?" Becoming "lost" indicates a very serious disadvantage.

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 & wisdom is a process; it needs time, hard work; 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 under the genre of entertainment to get people's attention. Unfortunately, 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 are a cover for emptiness. It is hardly mere coincidence that people who trivialize the sacred end up idolizing the trivial. Checking this out makes for an interesting exercise!

CONTEMPLATION

Second Vatican Council (in context of positively affirming modern developments) asked:
 “how will people preserve the ability to contemplate and to wonder from which comes wisdom.” (GS 56,59).

Note: the Council linked “wisdom” with the “ability to contemplate and to wonder”.

Contemplation is a way of seeing. The book of Wisdom (ch 13) makes a scathing commentary on those who see a wonderful world but don’t recognize its Maker. Of course, the reference was to unbelievers – but also sleep-walkers, i.e. most of us most of the time. We see the world around us without seeing the “extraordinary side of the ordinary” (John Paul II); the “presence of the ultimate in the commonplace” (Abraham Heschel). In the second century CE, Irenaeus had said: “the glory of God is the human fully alive; and being fully alive comes from seeing God.” He wasn’t talking about Heaven, but about seeing, in the commonplace and the ordinary, something more than meets the eye.

OUR DEBT TO ABRAHAMIC FAITH

This way of seeing is similar to, but different from, the way 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 kind of thinking leaves little 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. The Hebrew scriptures record how an embattled, struggling people experienced that assurance.

Using methods of thought developed by Aristotle and introduced to the West by mainly Muslim scholars, medieval Christians 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, and respect for the proper autonomy of the sciences, owes much to the faith that came down from Abraham.

Moreover, the Hebrew people’s experience of God came through their experience of a love they knew they had not merited or deserved, and was not owed 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 gift/grace. 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... To live in that kind of world people need a reason for hope that stands beyond the reach of every disaster, and still find meaning whatever happens. This is

what people are deprived of if they have no reason for hope beyond what this world can offer. This is a form of starvation.

Moreover, when God is excluded, even secular reality is diminished: it is no longer seen as the revelation of God's purposes, and to be respected. To believers, secular reality 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 own interpretation of that instinct needed to be corrected by historic revelation.

PARTLY OUR RESPONSIBILITY

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

- by too easily living with that "split" between the faith we profess and our actual lives;
- by our disunity;
- by religious fundamentalism that interprets reality unscientifically.
- by versions of religiosity that are 'lite' and unsatisfying.

Secularism underestimates God's love. How could it not? But religious faith, like secularism, can also underestimate God's love - e.g.

- when it indulges pious practices which imply that we need to earn God's love;
- or practices which suppose that we can put God in our debt;
- or claims that would put a limit on God's presence or love or mercy;
- or that sees worship as separable from our daily lives and business practices;
- or sees church-going as the main measure of Christian discipleship.

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? 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?

FAITH'S RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC LIFE

The God that Abraham, Moses & the prophets "saw" was a God they were not expecting; who was not beholden to their questioning; not answerable to us; not at our disposal; supremely free; did not owe us our existence; did not need to create. We don't begin to know ourselves until we know we might never have existed. The mystery of our own existence is located in the mystery of God's transcendent freedom! Really knowing that is a transformative experience. "All the bushes now burn if you have seen one burn. Only one tree has to fill up with light and angels, and you never see trees the same way again." (R. Rohr).

This is how contemplation becomes conversion: after all, it is not the bushes that burn or light up, it is ourselves that change. We move *from* taking the world for granted *as if* there were no one to thank for it; *as if* we were not accountable... *towards* treating it for what it actually is – i.e. gift!

What is sometimes called “spiritual poverty” is a way of living with the knowledge that ultimately *nothing is owed to us* and therefore *everything is gift!* This really is cause for wonder. It is conversion in a radical sense. And it radically changes the way we relate to everything, including social, political and economic realities. It starts with the person: “there can be no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons”. (Paul VI. Evangelization, 18)

In the same breath, God is revealed to Moses as “Lord” and “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and fidelity... for a thousand generations...” (Exodus 34:5-7) This is why conversion brings us to compassion, because loving others in the way that God loves us means loving beyond what is deserved or due; beyond boundaries of what others have a right to, beyond what is owed to them, or fair, or even reasonable.

This kind of loving is a circuit breaker, because it is not caught in the cycle of getting even, of pursuing just deserts, or pay-back, or what’s fair. Like God’s mercy, it is gratuitous, forbearing, forgiving...

A society that does not exercise compassion becomes punitive, unforgiving, not open to new starts, rehabilitation, reconciliation. This is an entirely different culture. In that culture, compassion is counter-cultural.

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.

Catholic Social Teaching dares to take mercy, compassion, and forbearance into social and economic planning. This is the polar opposite of usual assumption that “the business of business is business”. For Catholic social teaching, the business of business is *people* – “he tangata, he tangata, he tangata,” and the wider agenda of “making human life more human”. For example:

- the well-being of workers, families, 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.*) Harvesting fruit trees and vines was supposed to factor 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 manufactured product!) Similarly regarding any supposed right to adopt based on the wants of adults regardless of the natural needs and rights of children.

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. Nothing else does that. And this is the most radical basis for transforming all our thinking about social, political and economic issues.

PART II MOVING ON

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." Anyway, we can't just leave faith and secularism facing each other in a kind of stand off, (as at the end of Part I above). The dynamic of the Gospel urges us on; the Word of God can penetrate anything. Benedict's question is what I now ask ourselves. How do we bring the Gospel into a secular environment?

ELEMENTS OF AN ANSWER (From a Roman Catholic perspective)

- 1) First we need to acknowledge that the Gospel will always be a stumbling block and folly. A watered down Gospel is not the Gospel.
- 2) We also need to 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.

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.

- 3) The Hound of Heaven has ways of reaching people that lie outside our management. 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. 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 the 'lite' religion they feel able to do without. Ultimately, "the mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory." (Col. 2:7)

- 4) People need to experience a sense of being “at home” simultaneously in both Church and world. Often, what they experience is a kind of dualism. In the 11th century, Pope Gregory VII rightly tried to extricate the Church from an unhealthy dependence on the emperor and secular powers. The eventual outcome of his efforts was a Church that increasingly isolated itself in a kind of “spiritual realm,” and a world that went its own way, culminating in the Enlightenment’s sense of not needing the Church. This left the Church ill-equipped to cope with, benefit from, or contribute to, Modernity. Even up till the 1950’s, the Church was still suppressing some of its own best scholars. It was only with the Second Vatican Council that the Church opted for a humbler, radically new relationship with the world, based on genuine dialogue.

The Council would affirm a remarkable unity between our daily lives and our everlasting future: “All the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured...” Nothing beautiful, loving, gracious, or good will ever be lost.

- 5) We need to deepen our belief that disciples of Christ carry the cross of Christ. Despite all our best efforts, we shall still experience sin and failure. We cannot allow the experience of failure to make us inward looking and paralyse us. We need to know that even our wrong-doing somehow belongs within the mystery of God’s plan. In fact, the whole of historic revelation (about grace, salvation) comes to us through the experience of sin and failure.

Paradoxically, in the experience of hopelessness we come to hope. The disciples told the stranger on the road to Emmaus what they “had hoped” Jesus of Nazareth might have done for them. It had to be explained to them that a far greater hope had emerged out of his resurrection, but this had presupposed Good Friday. Jesus himself hoped that there might have been some other way, subject however, to “your will be done”. Hope is not an assurance that things are going to turn out right; it is deep-down knowing that all will be well even when they don’t. The law of the Gospel is that through our experience of weakness the power of God is at its best.

On a personal level, the example of St Peter can help us to avoid feeling paralysed by all this: imagine the desolation he must have experienced over his shameful failure. What prevented him from turning in on himself was the experience of being entrusted, by the very One he had denied knowing, with a mission. Receiving this trust in spite of his unworthiness must have been for him a transforming revelation of how great God’s love for him was. Pope Francis suggests that we need to know both Peter disheartened and Peter transformed, and open our eyes to what is implied by the call to mission that we too have received. “God is present in every life even if it has been a disaster” (Pope Francis)

At the level of the whole Church, the same law of God’s power at work in human frailty applies: “A Church with wounds can understand the wounds of the world and make them her own, suffering with them.” (Pope Francis). Thirty years ago, when the Catholic Church was beginning to feel the pinch of insufficient vocations to priesthood, 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 even as we debate the whole problem of vocations.

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 no 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 learning 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 as a misfortune. For we have arrived at the time of humility, of dependence, of omnipotent grace, of God's tenderness, of the patience of giving birth, of suffering..."

It seems to me that these "elements of an answer" are but ways of being true to ourselves by being truer to the Gospel. Is there is any other way we can be fruitfully present in a secular society?