

Faith and Culture

An introductory paper for the Faith and Culture Symposium organised by the Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation. 5th October 2009.

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1 Welcome

I suppose there must be times for all of us, when we feel that we are inhabiting two worlds. We look at things in one way when we're in church and in another way when we go back outside again.

As you know, a lot of thought has been given in recent years, to identifying the features of the culture in which we live, and asking how we as Christians can communicate our faith in Christ to people whose mind-set does at times seem at odds with the message we're proclaiming.

As a priest and as someone who has taught philosophy at a fairly basic level, I've often asked myself these questions — and, like most of us I suppose, I'm still struggling. I doubt that Clare and David will offer us a ready-made answer — which in the nature of things is hardly possible. Still I'm confident that their reflections on this theme will very much enrich our understanding of the relationship between our faith and the culture of our time. I'd like to thank them very much for accepting the invitation to speak to us today.

For the next few minutes, I would like to set the scene and to highlight in a general way the importance of some of the issues we'll be discussing. I'll refer to some themes from *On The Way To Life* and add some comments based on my own experience.

2 Evangelisation and Dialogue

To begin with, I'll just make the very obvious point that evangelisation is essential to the Church. The last words of Jesus to his disciples were to proclaim the Good News to the nations, while the first act of the Apostles upon receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to proclaim to the crowds the death and resurrection of Jesus. Without denying the incredible missionary work of the Church over the centuries, perhaps

there was a tendency, say forty or fifty years ago when I was a youngster, to regard the Church as a sort of perfect society, self-contained and self-sufficient. Rather a static model, you might say. The formal teaching of the Church offers a very different picture, as in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.¹

Years ago, we might not have thought of some of these things (e.g. Mass and Confession) as having anything to do with evangelisation. Another way of putting it might be to say that we now realise more clearly that the Church doesn't exist just for the sake of its members but for the sake of the world.

This immediately raises the question of how to evangelise. Some years ago I heard a simple but striking comparison between two models of mission. On one model you arrive, let's say, somewhere on the coast of Africa. You set up a church and a school. You make the school so good that people will want to send their children there — and in that way you gradually make converts. You might almost say that you create a Christian culture and invite people to buy into it. On the other model, you go out into the country and get to know the beliefs and the customs of the people. You look for openings and points of contact and you build upon those, adapting the way you present the Gospel, in a way that the people will understand.

In the language of the parables we might perhaps call the first model the 'light on the hilltop' and the second one the 'leaven in the dough'. It seems to me that this second model is more favourable to dialogue. You may end up asking people to abandon some aspects of their existing world-view, but you're not asking them, as it were, to abandon all that they know and to step into a different world altogether. In that sense you set up a dialogue with the local culture, which is exactly what we're talking about today.

This applies just as much in England as it does in Africa. I know people who are, I would say, operating much more out of the first model than the second. They would

¹ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

say there's no point of contact between Christianity and contemporary culture, so the answer is to create a Christian sub-culture. I'm not sure how practical that is in the long term, but it does mean that any form of evangelisation is going to require non-Christians to step into what amounts to an almost completely different world-view. It's a world-view that I believe is actually true, consistent and you could even say beautiful — but without any form of dialogue with culture it's an awfully big leap to make in one go!

3 Characteristics of Contemporary Culture

On the Way to Life identifies many features of contemporary cultures. I'd just like to pick out a few that seem particularly relevant to our discussion.

3.1 Self-characterising

To begin with, contemporary cultures are self-characterising. As you might say, they define themselves.

'Modernity' is itself a narrative that characterises Western European and North American culture. It is the story that the culture tells about itself. In the process of narration it produces that which it narrates.²

The difficulty for us in trying to understand and respond to this, is that the story isn't either simple or explicit. Generally speaking it involves unspoken assumptions and attitudes, which are not easy to identify — even (and perhaps especially) when we ourselves are part of that culture.

3.2 Rejection of preceding culture

Each form of culture defines itself in reaction against something that has gone before. In that sense there is always an implied criticism of earlier world-views, a self-conscious break with what went before. This is not something new; it was just as true of the philosophers who rebelled against the medieval scholastic tradition and of the Protestant reformers who rejected the abuses they saw in the Catholic Church.

² *On the Way to Life*, p.13.

Sometimes this rejection of the preceding culture involves a desire to return to an earlier culture, as in the 19th-century Gothic Revival in architecture and the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art. But history never repeats itself. There is always a movement forwards in some sense — at least there is when there is any vigour and vitality in the movement. I suspect that pure nostalgia and the desire simply to perpetuate the customs of a bygone age is a cultural dead-end.

3.3 A secular view of salvation

Modernity offers us an alternative version of salvation, where we are to seek our ultimate happiness in this-worldly terms.³ Again, the challenge is to make this explicit in order that we can in some way dialogue with it. Take something as simple and pervasive as advertising. The advertisers aren't (as far as I know) intending to promote what you might call a secular gospel. But in a sense that's what they end up doing, when in one way or another they seek to convince us that our lives will be incomplete unless we buy their product.

3.4 A view centred on man, not God

Then *On the Way to Life* identifies a shift from a way of understanding the world, based on man rather than on God.⁴ This would be an interesting topic to discuss. The idea of God was obviously more prominent in the world-view of previous centuries, though I wonder how much impact this made on the thinking of ordinary people, most of the time. What I think we *can* definitely say is that earlier cultures, on the whole, assumed that the world is simply given, something we have to accept and cannot essentially change. In order to be happy you had to adapt to the world as you found it. Nowadays, technology offers the (perhaps illusory) prospect of being able to remake the world to suit ourselves. And in a post-modern perspective you might say very simply that we can create our own personal world — which in former times would have been seen as a symptom of insanity!

3.5 The 'turn to the subject'

A further aspect is the way in which the personal experience of the individual is seen as sufficient in itself to justify acceptance. No external authority is required. *On the Way to Life* calls this the 'turn to the subject'.

³ *On the Way to Life*, p. 14.

⁴ *On the Way to Life*, p. 13.

Even within the anthropocentric understanding, there is a further movement from what we may call 'objective' sources of authority and truth to those that are 'subjective'. Hence, part of our contemporary culture is the value we give to 'experience' and 'feeling' as modes of validation. If validation is conferred through these subjectivities then there is no need to defer to an external or 'higher' authority.⁵

One aspect of this is seen in the change in attitudes brought about by the impact of the Internet:

As every member of society has access to [information] technology within easy and immediate reach, they also have access to sources of authority beyond the traditional institutional channels. Moreover, the whole notion of 'expert' and 'profession' with its regulation, values, and accountability is transformed and in many ways circumvented. Authority is 'democratised' ...⁶

In simple terms, your authority is now determined by the number of hits on your web site or the popularity of your blog!

3.6 No 'big story'

One effect of this is to discourage the search for or the acceptance of any form of meta-narrative, a big story within which everything else makes sense. You 'buy into' a particular narrative in a particular context, without expecting it to be consistent with any other narrative you may work with in some other context.

This contrasts with the Catholic tradition where, to quote the late Cardinal Hume, 'there is no question of becoming Catholic *a la carte*. You have to take the [set] menu — or move to another restaurant.'⁷ This reminds us that, although we must dialogue with various elements of contemporary culture, there does come a point where a potential convert does have to accept certain core beliefs, which are as it were essential to the package. At the same time, a genuine dialogue can help make it possible for him or her to reach the point where such an acceptance is possible.

⁵ *On the Way to Life*, p. 16.

⁶ *On the Way to Life*, p. 21.

⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, obituary published 18th June 1999.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/5497073/Cardinal-Basil-Hume-OM.html>

3.7 The search for meaning

Despite this proliferation of narratives, there is still a longing for meaning, a quest for personal and group identity. It does seem, though, that the emphasis is on the searching rather than on the possibility of finding a ready-made meaning (so to speak) such as might be provided by the Gospel. Coming back to *On the Way to Life*,

The search for meaning is intensified in modernity as discourses differentiate and multiply ... Education becomes a question of mastering these different 'languages' but it cannot supply a sense of unity. Nietzsche's claim [that 'God is dead'] signals the death of meaning in the sense of a unified vision of the world and our place in it.⁸

To put it simply (as I like to do), contemporary culture has rejected any form of all-encompassing meta-narrative and yet has left us unable to provide any substitute for ourselves. Life is emptied of meaning except on the level of trivialities.

3.8 The 'burden of ordinariness'

On the Way to Life calls this trivialisation of life, the 'burden of ordinariness'.

Truth also becomes domestic and so life – its tragedy and comedy – is lived within the 'ordinary.' Although we retain the words for 'evil' and 'holy', they cease to have any metaphysical depth or touch upon the ontology and purpose of our lives. They no longer have a reference in transcendence ... The 'ordinary' confines us to the horizons of the street. We inhabit the 'The Queen Vic' or walk the length of 'Coronation Street'. The 'ordinary' refuses anything but the domestic narrative. Our 'heroes' become celebrities, as ephemeral and flat as their image on the screen.⁹

This reminds me of a story told by a priest who was visiting a primary school. When one child was asked what she'd like to be when she grew up, she replied, 'a celebrity'. In other words, not famous for some great deed or achievement — just famous ... and any way of becoming famous will do, however trivial.

In contrast with this fascination with celebrity, Christianity is able to find meaning and even wonder in things which are on the face of it quite ordinary. GK Chesterton, for

⁸ *On the Way to Life*, p. 20.

⁹ *On the Way to Life*, p. 23.

instance, delighted in persuading his readers to look at familiar situations from a new and startling point of view. And of course St Therese, whose relics are currently touring this country, is a famous example of how the simplest acts, done out of love and offered to God, can help us grow in holiness.

3.9 Emphasis on experience

Having rejected the sort of world-view that religion offers, contemporary culture looks, almost in desperation, for something to give a sense of significance to life. In another interesting observation, *On the Way to Life* notes that

Such a culture is susceptible to ‘events’ constructed by organisations, where everything has to be on a ‘mega’ scale, especially the hype, to promote the ‘event’ as ‘extraordinary’. Such ‘events’ cannot be missed without condemning oneself to the endlessness of the ordinary...¹⁰

A priest told me recently that he overheard a conversation between a young man and his girl-friend, where it seemed that the event they’d planned to attend that evening had somehow failed to materialise. Apparently this was a huge crisis for them and almost amounted to a state of panic. Each was angry with the other for failing to prevent the sad state of affairs whereby they’d be thrown back upon their own resources in order to find something to do!

With this emphasis on experience we can see the attraction of what is called ‘spirituality’ in the narrow sense, in which it is contrasted with religion. It remains on the level of experience while at least suggesting that it has a significance that goes beyond the emotion of the moment. At the same time it avoids the need to submit oneself to an all-encompassing system of belief. At the risk of being controversial, I wonder sometimes whether there isn’t in this a similar temptation to that which attracted the people of Israel to the worship of idols. It gives some of the comfort of religion without the requirement of surrendering to the one true God — who is liable to make inconvenient demands!

¹⁰ *On the Way to Life*, p. 25.

4 Is Dialogue possible?

Against this somewhat discouraging background, from the point of view of traditional Christianity, is it even possible to engage in a process of dialogue? There are some aspects of the social landscape that are somewhat more positive than we might expect.

Regarding the content of people's belief, the *European Values Study* (1999-2000) reveals a relatively strong generalised belief in 'God' (71.8%) ... Only 31% understand this to be a 'personal God', while 40.1 % believe in a 'spirit or life force'.¹¹

A certain openness to religion was reflected in the Theos report in 2007, *Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*.

- The majority of people believe that religion is a force for the good in society (pp. 43 ff.)
- Atheists feel more under threat and now feel the need to 'fight back' (p. 17)
- Interest in faith is increasing across Western culture (p. 15)
- Religion is on the agenda of government and the media (p. 15)

And more recent research (April 09) from Christian Research shows 75% of adults are 'searching' (have had cause to reconsider their core values, or think about the big issues like 'the meaning of life').

With this in mind it seems to me that there is far greater hope than might at first appear, for a real dialogue with the people of our time. And certainly as long as it has not yet proved to be impossible, we must continue to strive for it. The Pharisees prided themselves on avoiding all contact with 'sinners' or those outside the Law. Jesus went out to the prostitutes and tax collectors, the lepers and the non-Jews. We may end up taking refuge in the sub-culture of the ghetto, but if we do this it will be against the example of Jesus himself.

¹¹ *On the Way to Life*, p. 10.

In the end, I think my faith in the possibility of dialogue is based on a theological premise, that we are all created in the image of God and that our Creator is at work in the hearts of all people of good will, however confused or misinformed they may be. I'm hoping that what we do today will leave me in a better position to engage in this dialogue and more confident that it is a real possibility for us.