



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Meaning and Hope - Christianity's place in Modern Britain

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness”. This quotation is well known and comes, of course, from Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. But what about today?

The philosopher, Martin Buber speaks of “epochs of habitation”, and “epochs of homelessness”. In the former, man lives in the world as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times he does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent. Sometimes I look round and wonder if we are not living through an epoch of homelessness. In spite of the massive achievements of the past century, there are signs that we have lost the sense of being “at home” in a world that makes sense to us. During the past fifty years there has been greater scientific and technological progress than in the two previous millennia and yet we are finding our way in a cosmos whose wonders we are only just beginning to understand. Is it then the best of times? Perhaps it is also the worst of times as the spiritual and moral values that underpin our human community have been so badly shaken. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, told the story of a Jewish sage who, “stroking his beard and looking up from his volume of the Talmud says, “Thank God, things are so good”. Then he pauses and adds, “then surely, if things are so good, how come they are so bad?” He continues, “That surely is the question of our times. The Jewish answer is that in achieving material abundance we have lost our moral and spiritual bearings. In achieving technical mastery we have lost sight of the question, “To what end?” Valuing science at the expense of ethics, we have unparalleled knowledge of what is, and unprecedented doubts of what ought to be.” A Christian can only agree with him. There seems to me to be a deep unease lying at the heart of our Western civilization.

Some years ago I was invited to take part in a big celebration of the Royal Society of Arts which was commemorating 250 years of its existence. The celebration was held at the Albert Hall before three or four thousand people. In the morning, five people were invited to speak for ten minutes about the benefits of what had happened over the 250 years and, in particular, about what is called the ‘Enlightenment’. So there spoke the Astronomer Royal, a very well known philosopher, a scientist, and rather surprisingly, the Chief Executive of something called ‘Starbucks’, speaking of the benefits of benevolent capitalism! It was a eulogy of what had happened to improve and open up the facets of the Society following the ‘Enlightenment’.

I began by reflecting on the era in which the Royal Society began. Those years of the 17th and 18th Centuries were an extraordinary period. What was it Alexander Pope said about Isaac Newton? “Nature and nature’s laws lay hid in night. God said, ‘Let Newton be’ and all was light”. Enlightenment was an optimistic creed. Out with authority and revealed religion and in with Reason and the critical faculty. Out with the old sciences, in with the new science, whereby the improvement of the world would be made possible, unlocking the mysteries of nature and revealing their logical, rational foundations in the laws of physics and chemistry. The world was to get better and better and would continue to do so. No one could deny and should deny the great advances that the Enlightenment has made from which we still benefit today. We Christians are indeed its beneficiaries in every realm of human development and thought.

One objective of the Enlightenment was, however, to relegate religion to the private sector. The arguments of the Enlightenment eventually seemed to prove that religion and life were separate. If religion helped people to live a nicer, better life, all to the good and its place could be justified. But essentially, religion, whether it was Christianity or Judaism or any other religion was to be privatised. If the notions of the world or of the human condition, based on the stories of the Bible or derived from theological orthodoxy were shown to be

incompatible with the discoveries of science then religion became discredited. The notion of God was needed only to fill the gaps left by scientific knowledge and those gaps were seen to be rapidly narrowing.

But of course what I want to put to you today is that the Enlightenment left out an understanding of the whole person. Scientific discovery does not reveal the whole of the mystery of the human person. Pascal says, "The heart has its reasons of which Reason knows nothing". Or St. Augustine, "God has created us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him". In other words, the need for the transcendent is not something, as it were, added on to humanity but is an intrinsic part of humanity. Whether we like it or not, the end of religion has not come. The spread of Islam, whatever its challenges to us, speaks for itself. Eighty years of atheistic communism visibly failed to extinguish Christianity in the old Soviet Union. Christianity is clearly a major political force in the U.S.A., as well as in much of Africa and Latin America. Even in our "old, tired Europe", religious believers remain a significant witness in what people call a post-modern or post-Christian society.

The fact is that the questions raised by the Enlightenment which seemed to have been settled are raised again in our modern society in a new and powerful way. Science cannot of itself provide answers to new moral dilemmas which scientific advance has created. Is it right or wrong for a country, for purposes of self-defence, to retain or develop a nuclear capability which, if used, could virtually destroy civilisation? How far is it right to pursue economic growth and industrial development at the expense of the future well-being of the planet? How do we justify billions spent on the race for space, or military hardware, or indeed the billions spent on remorselessly improving our own standard of living when so many of our fellow human beings live in abject poverty? Who is to control or decide on an ethical response to the questions about the creation of life which biological and medical research has unearthed? Scientists are sometimes tempted to disown their responsibility for the moral consequences of their research. They see their job as to explore. It is for others to say what use their explorations can legitimately be put to.

These questions are ultimately religious questions. I do not mean that religion has all the answers, but religion raises the question of what it means to be a human being, a human person, and what rights attach to our humanity or whether a human being has any inalienable rights. For believers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the fundamental picture of the human person is stated at the very beginning of the Bible: "In the beginning God created man in His own image and likeness" (Gen.1:26). This appears, not as an obsolete myth but as a resource of meaning which illumines our place in the universe and our relation with our own bodies and with one another. As G.K. Chesterton put it: "One of the chief uses of religion is that it makes us remember our coming from darkness, the simple fact that we are created". That is at the heart of the human condition. While the extreme rationalist might argue that religion is just organised superstition, most people have that sense of the mystery of life which we all wrestle with in different ways. So while we applaud the things for which science has stood for – progress, better education, better health care, better understanding of the human condition, we should also understand that religion is central to the release of the whole person. Without religion, and religion as part of life, part of society, and part of the innate search of men and women for the transcendent, for God, then we are all missing out.

That is a long introduction. I want this evening to speak about three ways in which religion and, in particular, Christianity relates to society in the public forum. The Catholic bishops of the world at the Second Vatican Council in 1965 laid out three areas where the Church would hope to contribute to the whole of society. The first was to contribute to the safeguarding of the dignity of the human person; secondly, to strengthen the seams of human society and, in particular, the family, and thirdly, to imbue every human activity with a deeper meaning, the meaning of our existence made clear for us and indicated in the mission of Christ on earth and that this has a transcendental dimension which affects the whole of society. In particular, I want to reflect on those three aspects of our relationship with society and focus on the centrality of the family, the dignity and the importance of elderly people and the relationship of our faith and the rationality of our world. I want to end with something which we Christians should bear witness to in our society today.

First of all the family. I happened to read recently a report by UNICEF – The United Nations Organisation for the Welfare of Children, which alerted us to much unhappiness among many of our children. It identified that children in the United Kingdom were at the bottom of the child well-being league. This was worked out by making comparisons with other European countries and it looked at groups of indicators: well-being, materialism and inequality. It was fascinating to read in the children's own words of their experience. It tells a story of parents being sometimes for good reasons too engaged in their jobs to give time to their children.

They come home from work exhausted and find that their children want them to play with them. The father has to miss out on a holiday because he was so busy. Of course, it says, parents try to compensate for what is missing, but the report shows that things, no matter how beautiful, fashionable or expensive cannot substitute for people and relationships that are real. The report says that this negative well-being of children is not caused by uncaring or neglectful parents. They are trying to do their best but are pulled in so many different directions that they, too, are suffering. The report draws the conclusion that, "Behind the statistics we found British families struggling. Pushed to find the time their children want, sometimes exacerbated by uncertainty about the rules and the roles operating within the family household. And we found less participation in outdoor and creative activities amongst older and more deprived children". It was quite clear that children's well-being centres on time with a happy, stable family, having good friends and plenty of things to do, especially outdoors. They did not want to spend too much time with computer games and the notion of waiting and saving up for material rewards were highly regarded by the vast majority of children. It seems from this report that the children are identifying something important about our lives, our values, our relationships, and ourselves. They remind us that each generation has a responsibility to those that went before and those that will come after. The future is not something that is always about to happen; it is a reality which we are creating now in our children and grandchildren.

There is, of course, one dimension which is missing from the UNICEF report which is that there is no examination of the spiritual dimension to children's welfare and development. It may well be that the report ruled this dimension beyond their remit, or they lacked the tools to adequately measure it. But it is a huge gap. In so many ways, our children are trying to tell us that happiness is more than material things; exchanging relationships of care, love, mutual sharing and learning for things is only an impoverishment and not an enrichment. I would not want to stress this too strongly but it is clear that Christian schools in our country, whether Church of England or Roman Catholic, are far more sought after than other schools. This is not because the children who frequent these schools are more intelligent or from better homes than others but rather, the format, the expectations, the clarity of the moral standards of the school are based on a religious conviction which communicates itself to the children. All of this means something quite profound, quite simple, namely that we are spiritual beings and a child is a living, acutely aware spiritual person, open to the great mysteries of the universal life itself. We do even more damage to them and to ourselves if we choose to deny this reality. Our society constantly pressurises us to having, to make us consumers and make us believe that our happiness and well-being depend on having or doing the things that are put before us. This is a real impoverishment as it builds into a deep dependency which is not just material but psychological and spiritual. What is it St. Paul says to the Philippians? "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8). Paul exhorts us to seek the very highest and the best in our lives. What I have said is foundational to the family which makes all of us a part of the community larger than ourselves. It gives us the resources we need to grow, to build the sort of society that is dynamic, moral, open and free.

The family is the most enduring social institution that we have. It is the foundation of all societies and is our security against the overwhelming claims of the State. History teaches us that when Governments wish to claim absolute power over their citizens they begin by either undermining the family or controlling it. This is why Christian communities have always been staunch in defence of the family. The family is where we start from. It is there that we learn who we are and what it means to belong. It teaches us to have responsibilities not only to ourselves but to others. The family is the first and often the most influential school of truth and values. It is the community in which we learn to distinguish good from bad, what is worthy from what is base. Whether the times are good or bad, whether we are strong and successful or we struggle, the family is often the most dependable, resourceful and caring thing we have.

We know that there is considerable evidence to support what we know from experience that a stable marriage of a mother and a father is the best possible opportunity we can give any child. It is why family and the institution of marriage upon which it is built, is the most important institution that we have. For most people it is also the greatest joy, the one thing for which they would sacrifice their life so highly is it prized. It is what gets them up in the morning and what drives them home at night. Our marriage and our families are the most natural and yet the most significant contribution that most people make to the common good. It is something that affects us all.

I do not want to spend much time on the recent debate over extending the status of marriage to same-sex partnerships. I will just say this: first of all, all Christians are not and should not be anti-gay. It may disagree with the life-style but it also recognises the dignity and value of every man and woman irrespective of sexual orientation. The issue is not about that. It is about a more subtle issue, namely about democracy and the nature of marriage itself. On what grounds does a minority have the right to change the meaning of a fundamental institution for the majority? Although governments acknowledge that marriage does not belong to them they nevertheless feel they can change it whenever they wish. In this case there is no need to change. There is no problem with marriage that the proposed changes will correct. Civil partnerships enjoy all the major legal and social benefits that a marriage gives between a man and a woman. We are being conditioned to think that all discrimination is by its very nature bad and somehow unjust. But this is patently untrue. We discriminate wisely and necessarily every day. I do not believe that maintaining a distinction between civil partnerships, between same-sex couples and a marriage between a man and a woman constitutes unjust discrimination. Rather, it preserves a legitimate and fundamental difference which is essential for a fair and plural society. Moreover, it recognises that there are indeed some human institutions over which the State does not have absolute control. If we allow marriage to become the plaything of governments, advancing their particular political and social agendas, we do not strengthen but undermine those enduring sources of personal and civil good. Marriage and family are personal spaces which need to be secured against the unnecessary encroachment of the State. Marriage is good for society and is one of its basic building blocks. There has never been a society which has not had marriage and the family as its basic unit. Marriage is good for children and the best outcomes for children are to be found within marriage, whether in how they perform at school or in their social behaviour. Marriage is good for the partners themselves. Most studies show that people who are married live longer, are healthier and perhaps even happier. Marriage is good for society, good for children and good for the partners themselves.

Of course, I am aware, as all of us are, of the difficulties of many families: the break-ups and the one-parent families. That does not mean we should not strive for the norm, for the template. It means that we have to support marriage because it is not just the story of two people but the very fabric of our society that is at stake. We seem to be more concerned with facilitating the supposedly cost-free termination of marriage instead of supporting and assisting couples who are experiencing difficulties in their relationship. Marriage and our understanding of it is a model that Governments change or reject, trivialise or disparage, at our peril.

There is another area which concerns the preciousness of human life and it surfaces in the failure to care adequately for our elderly and the callousness with which we have come to treat life, especially the life of the unborn. When human nature has become a product and the person a commodity then both must ultimately surrender to the logic of 'inconvenience' and 'disposability'. Instead of regarding the elderly as a source of value in their own right, a resource for families and communities especially in an increasingly fragmented social and cultural world, we view them as a problem or a threat. We have lost that deep reverence for humanity in all its different conditions. Care for the elderly goes back through generation after generation. Even Cicero had time to write a booklet about old age and says, "Wretched is the old age which has to speak in its own defence and he praises Sparta where nowhere else was such deference paid to length of years or age held in such honour".

An ageing population certainly presents its challenges – not least to our prejudices - but it is also an extraordinary gift. When society only sees age as an expensive inconvenience, a threat to resources and life-styles, it no longer sees a person but a problem. This permits a slow erosion of dignity; subtly and silently the process of dehumanisation has begun. A symptom of this is the violence against the vulnerable elderly now documented in a number of independent studies and reports and the neglect which many have to endure. You do not care for what you do not cherish. If we load the elderly, or indeed any group, with fears - the fear of dementia and Alzheimer's, the fear of growing dependence and the loss of autonomy, the fear of exhausting resources – you sanction violence against them. This need not only be physical, it can take other forms: it can be cultural in the way in which we dismiss their views or blame them; it can be political in the ways in which we justify withdrawal of vital services or quietly and privately deny their right to life.

How we see the elderly is also about how we see ourselves. Age may indeed strip us of our borrowed robes, but if all we see when we are naked is fear, inconvenience, and loneliness, then we have become blind to the grace of what is indescribably human. We have exchanged the precious gold of our substance for a manufactured counterfeit and called it progress. Our identities are not vested in our capacities they are also vested in our families and communities. They carry our identity for us, even when we can no longer remember

who we are or what we have done; we still belong. Only in a society which holds us in this sacred trust can we really be secure to grow, flourish and not fear diminishment.

The Christian faith reverences what is deepest and truest in us. In the person of Jesus Christ, God has not only shown us who He is but who we are. That is why Christianity sees beyond the condition of our body or mind to the dignity which each and everyone has. It can do this because it knows that that dignity is not grounded in our physical, social or mental state; it is grounded in God whose image we bear; it is forever held in the very humanity of Christ – true God and true man.

I want to turn to something connected mainly with the elderly. Christians, on the whole, are against assisted suicide. It seems to me there are very good reasons why it would be a very grave mistake to pass such a law legitimising assisted dying. I think it would be a very grave mistake, and not just because I am a Christian. The key issue in the debate about assisted suicide isn't compassion or morality or religion or medicine. The key issue is whether it makes sense to change the law to make it legal. However, the advocates of assisted suicide and a change in the law are suggesting that we should give legal sanction in advance of any act being committed to ending or helping to end someone's life in certain prescribed circumstances. Now it is one thing for the Director of Public Prosecutions to conclude, after examining all the evidence of what actually took place, that an act of assisted suicide was not malicious but was carried out with great reluctance and in the face of persistent pressure from the deceased and that the public interest does not require a prosecution. But that is quite different from authorising the act before it has been committed on the basis of an eligibility assessment. However compassionate the circumstances may seem and however loving and caring the family may appear at the assessment stage, once legal sanction has been given there is nothing to prevent malicious pressure or coercion being brought to bear on the victim before the act is carried out. Yes, of course, there are compassionate relatives who give that assistance with great reluctance and out of genuine compassion. But there is a darker side to humanity that we ignore at our peril. Not all cases of assisted suicide represent the final act or acts of love or the culmination of a life-long loving relationship. The trouble with enabling laws is that they have a tendency, once they are on the statute book, to encourage the acts that they enable. An example is the 1967 Abortion Act which is a classic example of how a law that was enacted for altruistic reasons and on the basis that abortion would be a somewhat exceptional procedure, ended up creating its own social culture. With abortions now running at 200,000 a year in England and Wales alone, even the instigator of this piece of legislation has admitted that it has not turned out as he intended. Laws are not precision guided missiles. They have a habit of inflicting collateral damage well beyond the intended target area. You may feel that it is our prerogative as individuals to decide when and how we die. You may not unreasonably argue that if our lives are our own to do with as we see fit, then we should be free to end them as and when we wish. But when we talk about assisted suicide, we are not talking about ending our own lives, but about involving someone else in the act. A few months ago I spoke to a large number of doctors and although there wasn't a vote, on the whole it seemed to me they were totally against such a step. Most doctors are against a change in the law and regard legalised assisted suicide, as dangerous - and it is doubly dangerous if they have to be involved in it. As Christians who believe in the sanctity of human life as created and loved by God, I am sure we would want to oppose such a law.

It seems to me that when unexamined there are three monsters on our cultural landscape: equality, freedom and tolerance. What worries me today is the development of a kind of negative tolerance. For the sake of tolerance the Government forced the Roman Catholic Church to close its Adoption Agencies because we were not able to accept politically correct law which said that all agencies have to accept homosexual couples if they wished to adopt. This went against the conscience of Catholic teaching which asserted that the best way of bringing up children was with a father and a mother. Thus the agencies have had to close for no good reason because homosexual couples could adopt from any other agency. All this for the sake of tolerance. For the sake of tolerance we must not allow a person to wear a cross so that Christianity is not expressed visibly. In the name of tolerance it seems to me tolerance is being abolished. Our danger in Britain today is that so-called Western reason claims that it alone has recognised what is right and thus claims totality that is inimical to freedom. No one is forced to be a Christian. But no one should be forced to live according to the new secular religion as if it alone were definitive and obligatory for all humankind. Pope Benedict said once, "Christianity finds itself exposed now to an intolerant pressure which at first ridicules it – as belonging to a perverse false way of thinking – and then tries to deprive it of breathing space in the name of an ostensible rationality". We should oppose such a claim because this is not pure reason but rather the restriction of reason to what can be known scientifically – and at the same time the exclusion of all that goes beyond it. It is very, very dangerous.

You may well say that if this lecture is supposed to be about Christianity's place in modern Britain, what then have we to do? I have spoken about marriage and the family as one generative institution of society and of the dignity of elderly people which must be upheld at all times. But also, I believe that religious communities and traditions of faith are another. The propaganda of secularism and its high priests wants us to believe that religion is dangerous for our health. It suits them to have no opposition to their vision of a brave new world, the world which they see as somehow governed only by people like themselves. They conveniently forget that secularism itself does not guarantee freedom, rationality, an absence of prejudice or violence. It was John Milton who said, "No one can love freedom but good men; the rest love not freedom but licence". Indeed, in the last century, most violence is perpetrated by secular states upon their own people. It was secular and totalitarian authorities of the last century that exercised horrific violence and tried to subject their citizens to their own destructive philosophies. They tend to obscure the enormous practical commitment of religious communities and churches to the welfare of people and the common good of the nation. When Governments run out of money, lose interest, or are distracted by the latest political fashion, it is often the churches that are quietly getting on with the work. They demonstrate commitment and sustainability. They do this because they transcend the transitory politics of the day. They create, build, sustain communities and they have a continuity of vision and wisdom that carries them through. They nourish our humanity, healing body and soul because they understand who we are.

There was a slogan on buses in London, hired by atheists, back in 2009 to spread the non-believing word. That slogan read: "There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". In other words, nasty religion puts constraint on your behaviour and makes you miserable. As somebody put it, "This fatuous slogan gets to the heart of why people have turned away from biblical religion, not because it is irrational but because it puts constraints on their behaviour. This is the source of the hatred – the biblical religion is seen as a restraint on the ability to behave exactly as you want." What such people don't realise is that true freedom only exists within constraints; and far from expanding freedom, unconstrained liberalism leads straight to abuses of power. We can see this from the logical false faiths that are filling the vacuum.

So far from shackling us or placing us under some kind of slavery, Christian faith and practice preserves our freedom. It gives us an alternative vision of things. And this is not a threat to society, but rather its salvation. It gives us roots, belonging, moral responsibility and access to wisdom, to the art of life and how to live it humbly, generously and well. It also keeps social conscience alive; it refuses to let us ignore or erase the other, the weak, the vulnerable, the forgotten. Even when it falls short of these things, Christian people know that they are always accountable to God who is beyond every State and whose justice endures eternally. In its very failures, faith can show our society how to repent, forgive, renew and start again even when the task seems beyond us. In some of the communities it generates and creates a space of freedom against the oppressions of the demanding world. Within the secular it gives a space of refuge and hospitality to the human soul. It is a place where anyone can take up their vocation to work and their vocation to life. In Orthodox monasteries there is a happy custom that at the end of the day, after Night Prayer, the Abbot sits in his chair and one by one the monks go up and kneel before the Abbot who kisses each one on the top of the head, a sign of acceptance, forgiveness and love. This is a sign of the Fatherhood and the mercy of God Who accepts us because He created us, Who forgives us because we are weak and vulnerable and Who loves us with an infinite love. This witness of Christians is crucial in Britain today because it indicates in a real way what people yearn for in their lives – namely, meaning and hope.

In these few reflections I have tried to identify some of the problems that our society faces. I have tried to give a clue to the sort of answers we can give to the questions that haunt us and our culture. I have tried to say what ways we should stand up against the encroaching militant secularism and the consequences of its creed. It requires much more than solving our economic problems because it requires us to discover again who we are and to unmask the god or gods we follow. If we remove faith from the answer we remove what is most vital for ourselves. If we Christians remove the source of our life, namely, Jesus Christ we place ourselves in a confused slavery to every false messiah and their empty promises. The promises, yes, offer a future, but underneath the gift wrapping, it is one of sterile despair. Already we hear something of the longings of children and what they will say to us when this future arrives.

Christianity has a vocation in our society and we have to live it with clarity, conviction and courage. We do not have all the answers to the many complex problems and we know that often life has to be a sort of rough improvisation with what we have at hand. But we do know that we are never alone, that we have the presence of Christ and his promise. "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Dear friends, we Christians perhaps today have to be more imaginative in the way we present our faith to our society here in Britain. Above all, it needs each one of us to live our faith more deeply by prayer and understanding, not only of the Christian faith but also of the needs of our society today. Above all, it needs courage. We know that it is the love of God in Christ that He has for each individual and the love that He has for the society we create and also disfigure, that inspires, sustains and calls us. So what can you do? What can I do? You remember what St. Paul said, *caritas Christi urget nos* – the love of Christ urges us on. That is Christ's witness, His example, His way in good times and in bad. It must also be ours.

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