

Speaking with a forked tongue?

Christians in the public square

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Matthew 10: 16 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

“You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order.” (Jacques Ellul, quoting Dr Goebbels)

Introductory assumptions:

1. I'm a Roman Catholic, speaking with reference to the liturgy, bible, tradition, and magisterium – drawing upon the rich encyclical tradition and the impetus given to this debate by Pope Benedict
2. Not un-ecumenical but tradition specific move. (I wonder if there is any such thing called 'Christianity')
2. I'm assuming that reason operates within revelation, so that our outlook on the world is shaped by revelation – mediated through liturgy, scripture, tradition, magisterium, explicated by reason (and imagination, intuition, and practice)
3. I'm not for supporting reason independent of revelation (or indeed, of tradition – Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism), for such an abstraction is incoherent and an afterbirth of modernity.
4. I think that Catholicism, alongside the world religions, can take a fatal step of arguing for revelation alone - without reason (the concern of Benedict's Regensburg lecture) – and I would be keen to criticise such a move within Christianity and other religions, although I acknowledge that arguing with the latter requires different sorts of arguments.
5. I'm going to enact what I believe is possible for Catholicism in the public square: to have a conversation with forked tongue. That is at times drawing on reason as public argument, but always knowing and assuming that reason is based within revelation. This means that as a Catholic I employ reason to argue for the truth of the Catholic faith as the best good for society, be it Catholic or non-Christian.
6. This means that when Catholics speak in public, they attempt to both serve the common good and give witness to their faith. (In practice, Catholics, like so many Christians, have become assimilated and forgotten that we are people with a mission: to give witness to the Light of all nations).

7. I'm going to run through four options of models of discourse for the public square – and comment on them, one by one, from a Catholic point of view. I'm going to suggest that not only is the public square impoverished if we Christians retreat from contributing and learning within it, but that we cannot effectively be a light to the nations without engaging in the public square.

8. Indeed, the modern distinction between the private (religious domain) and the public (the civic square – democratic liberalism) is itself an outcome of an ideological trajectory that we should resist. But we live in our times, and that is where we need to start.

Models of public square discourse

1/ Ideological secularism:

(a) Religion is **false discourse and must be excluded from the public square** for the sake of the common good and future –

(ai) classical Marxism – pretty well collapsed, although interesting varieties exist in China, Soviet Union, and really are important in challenging the equation between 'capitalism' and 'liberal democracy'

(a ii) naturalistic scientism - dropping the left agenda, and developing – Dawkins and Hitchens, which promote science as the only true form of discourse, and thus sees religion as 'poison' and as 'delusion'

(a iii) laïcité – in the French version of separation of state and religion, which often masks Islamophobia, racism, and anti-clericism (and found in some UK legislation viz). Here we find an increasing move towards legislation that constantly trumps religious freedoms with the freedoms of minorities (women, gays, secularists): eg. the Lillian Ladele case, where conscience was not accepted even though she did not hamper civil marriages (Ladele v London Borough of Islington); or the adoption agency and gay couples case; or most perniciously the ban on *niqab*.

(b) Here, Christian argument must identify the ultimate falsity of such discourse (on metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and political grounds), while acknowledging the possible benefits it might bring

eg. i: indebtedness to Marxism for its focus on the incarnation (material reality) and its critique of ideology that promotes capitalism (without itself promoting its mirror opposite and thus embodying another ideology). But the critique, as against Zizek, is that the moral and spiritual

ii. indebtedness to the 'new atheism' for bringing religion to centre stage and proving critiques of the new atheism! Difficult to think of anything more positive in this case!

iii. indebtedness to attending to minorities, but increasingly failing to balance different contested freedoms. And the growing illiberalism of liberalism. BIG ISSUE.

Conclusion: One must resist ideological secularism as inappropriate to pluralist societies as they do not serve the common good in their mono-ideological outlook.

2/ Principled secularism

(a) We must find a form of discourse through which different groups can speak to each other so as to promote the common good. Religious discourse cannot serve this purpose as it represents only one group's discourse.

(ai) Rawls (could have chosen early Habermas).

Rawls notion of political liberalism: (stage one) excludes 'comprehensive doctrines' (religions and ideologies) and advances 'proceduralism' liberalism which gives 'public reasons' for proposals that can be accepted etc by different comprehensive doctrines.

(stage two) criticises Enlightenment liberalism as anti-Christian (thus sees the way some forms of proceduralism are ideological positions), and that religions 'translate' their thick description reasoning (scripture, tradition, magisterium) into thin description which is public reasoning.

(aii) critique (i) excludes religious arguments in the public square – no Martin Luther King, no Gandhi allowed, and keeps Tony Blair in the closet.

(ii) Unwittingly promotes a singular 'public reason' ideology (secular proceduralism without any comprehensive doctrines – and is such a position actually possible?)

(iii) the issue of 'translation' from 'thick' to 'thin' – is that we lose the idiomatic, rhetorical, and symbolic force of arguments and also finally conceal the question of authoritative sources in arguments.

(iv) the danger of not learning how others speak and how to argue with them – I'm assuming a genuine exclusion of traditions that have resort to revelation alone without reason (following Benedict here!)

(v) BUT important to recognise the force of many Christian arguments which can be pursued **at a certain level** through forms of public reasoning: eg. resisting abortion based on scientific knowledge of embryos and an accepted definition of 'human life', so that one might advance the principle 'it is always wrong to kill innocent life'

Conclusion: One must criticise various aspects of principled secularism as it fails to allow the religious dimension which forms part of the civic culture of many in society. It is well intentioned, but finally fails because the basic concept of neutrality is unsustainable.

3/ Postmodern secularism

(a) Richard Rorty (and Stanley Fish) (i) as with most forms of postmodernism, there is an acknowledgement of modernity's attempt to smuggle in a particular under the guise of a

universal: so Rorty grants that it is ‘hypocrisy to say that believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, where as we atheists have every right to base ours on Enlightenment philosophy. The claim that in doing so we are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum’.

(ii) but both in the end, for pragmatic reasons, suggest that we cannot get too far, Rorty calling religion a ‘conversation stopper’ (which means that he does not find the religious reasons given persuasive), thus promoting a more tolerant and self-critical form of principled secularism.

(b) Terry Eagleton nicely uncovers the ideological criteria in both, viz. late capitalism and a form of bourgeois aestheticism. He argues Fish can expose modernity’s pretence to universalism, but simply replaces it with postmodernity’s penchant for the particular, so that Fish in the end does ‘what so much Post-Modern thought does when confronted with a ‘bad’ universality – which is to say, set up a ‘bad’ particularism in its place. Postmodernists fail to grasp that such militant particularism is just the flipside of the vacuous universalism it deplores.’

Conclusion: Postmodern secularisms at least notes the weakness of principled secularisms, but fails to advance beyond various forms of postmodern late capitalism or American pragmatism

4/ Conversational democracy/secularism

(a) Geoffrey Stout’s position (Democracy and Tradition - 2004) is critical of the previous models for similar reasons to myself, and advances a conversational model that encourages the public square to be plural. This is promising, but notice the title – it sees the key to recognising traditioned discourse as presupposing democracy!

(i) Stout insists that for the conversation model to hold, all groups engaged in conversation must believe in the importance of the open conversation that democracy and civil society promote.

(ii) Stout insists that all groups must have a confidence that in such conversations resolutions can be reached. He argues this against MacIntyre viz. slavery and smoking in public.

(b) Crits: (i) democracy is the sacred cow/Trojan horse, that is a contingent, not necessary good in theology’s eyes (see JP II and Benedict’s critique of possible distortions in democracy)

(ii) only encourages liberal religious traditions as it is against hierarchical power as a source of truth (Luke Bretherton’s observation: ‘For Stout the threat to justice takes the form of a threat to the democratic traditions whereas for MacIntyre it takes the form of a threat to the process of tradition constituted rationality.’

(iii) Stout’s dependence on conversation as the path to light, downplays sin

Conclusion: Stout's conversational model is helpful, but is founded upon 'democracy' as its foundational principle which is only a contingent good and cannot sustain all forms of Christian engagement with the public square (China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France).

5/ Conclusion: Speaking with a forked tongue (wisely as serpents and as doves)

1. I hope the above is a helpful argument for positioning ourselves in a debate about the public square. We as Christians need not be apologetic, but confident that we have a vision with a serious thick description about the public good (the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is 524 pages long – and the best kept secret in the Catholic Church).

2/ But we live in a dilemma that requires constant mediation and working out:

(A) We have to learn how to speak as Christians – thus traditioned, arising out of worship, facing the world with hope, peacefulness, and a love of justice – so we must speak as Christians in the public square, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME

(B) We have to learn how to communicate and challenge and be challenged – thus engaging with the situation of the non-Christian other, shifting our discourse so that it speaks to the world – so that we speak as rational people in the public square, perhaps employing natural law, reason, and other tropes of argument. WHILE AT THE SAME TIME

(C) Realising that reason only has its proper telos within Christian revelation.

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