

Ebor Lecture Essay Prize 2016: Religion in the Public Sphere

Winner of the 19-25 category:

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The Disease of Decline:

A Diagnosis of the Condition of the Church in Secular Society and a Prognosis for its Recovery

The West (and, in particular, Europe) is undergoing, quite literally, a crisis of faith. The demographic identifying with Christian denominations is predicted to decrease 17.9% by 2050.¹ In the UK, talk of the drastic decline in church attendance has become old news. There is more resigned despair than surprise in the fact that Anglican priests across England have seen their flocks diminish with 22,000 falling away from Sunday service congregations; a drop of 7% in just five years.² A lack of religious observation is disheartening, but a lack of religion itself is disconcerting, and there is much for the faithful to worry about in the fact that a 2012 ComRes poll estimated atheists to make up 42% of the British population (up from 14% in 1963).³ The trend toward secularism appears as prescient (even if not as immanently ostensible) across the water. In the USA, the percentage of people characterising themselves as “nothing in particular” or “religiously unaffiliated” has risen from 17% in 2007 to 23% in 2015.⁴ This growing indifference toward religiosity posits a profound challenge to the faithful: how is religion to react to an increasingly irreligious public? For the believer to continue to operate on the basis that his religious convictions are commonplace and of shared value among his fellows runs the risk of further alienating the spiritual mind from the secular – a fissure already wide and deep enough as it is. On the other hand, should the believer abandon his faith in the public sphere and imprison Christ within the confines of the private, personal mind, then I should think one is entitled to question whether or not he is worthy of the title, “Believer”. Christ does after all command his Apostles in Matthew 28:19:

Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Masci, David. *Pew Research Center*. 15th April, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/15/europe-projected-to-retain-its-christian-majority-but-religious-minorities-will-grow/>

² Bingham, John. *The Telegraph*. 12th January, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12095251/Church-of-England-attendance-plunges-to-record-low.html>

³ *National Secular Society*. 25th October, 2012. <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2012/10/statistics-round-up--religion-in-decline-around-europe-and-usa>

⁴ *Pew Research Center*. 3rd November, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

Christ does not bid his Church be silent. On the contrary, he sends his followers out imbued with the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49 and Acts 2:1-4), and emboldened by it they begin to proclaim their faith (Acts 2:14-42). The beginning of Acts is a harmonious chorus of voices; it is filled with the noise of a Church that refuses to be bound to the upstairs room, a Church that will not be hushed by fear, a Church that simply cannot stay silent. The Church of today, if it is to claim for itself the unbroken line of succession established by Christ himself, must take its duty not to be silent as seriously now as it did then. This is the evangelical imperative placed upon the Church by Christ, and it prefixes the interface between religion and the public sphere. The dichotomy we therefore face is presenting a public theology to a public (increasingly) without theology.

Within this essay, I shall seek to accomplish three things: to diagnose the disease which has caused the decline in the respectability of the Church with regard to public affairs (a disease which, I will argue, manifests itself in three symptoms), to provide a suggestion for how such an ecclesiastical illness may be treated, and, finally, to briefly imagine what a Western world in which we observe a harmonious interaction between society and religion might look like. My scope is broad, and my time and space are limited. I shall therefore beg the pardon of the reader in confining my study of “religion” and the “public sphere” to an analysis of the “Christian Church” and its interaction with “Western Society”. I have no delusions to presume that this essay constitutes anything in the way of a conclusive analysis of the problems emergent from the intersection of religion and the public sphere. Nor do I intend the solutions provided in this paper to be taken as immediate panaceas to the often discordant dichotomy between faith and society. I am merely positing what I consider to be the three most obvious obstacles to a healthy and accommodating relationship between Christianity and the public with which it coexists, and suggesting how these might be overcome. There are, of course, many more than three difficulties besetting this bond, but, as stipulated, expediency demands I prioritise some arguments over others.

A Diagnosis of the Disease

As has already been addressed, for the past sixty or so years, religion has been gradually receding from the public sphere in the West, and where it remains it has for many become infected with the imagery of atavistic anachronism. I do not mean to say that the physical church has disappeared; go into any town or village in Europe or America and you will still, doubtless find a church building at the heart of its community. But that is the point: a church *building* is not a Church. It occupies a spatial area, not a spiritual one. The Church, the *ekklesia*, is a community gathered under Christ – gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20), believing in him. It is the *ekklesia* which we have seen deteriorate in recent years: in numbers, in power, in unity. The decline has been long, and drawn out; the “death of God” has been a painful one for many moderns who eventually embraced atheism. But for a generation growing up in a post-modern, Godless society, the image of the dead deity who they never experienced at any significant level is met with careless expressions and shrugs of apathy. This should concern us, for in those reactions we find nothing short of the symptoms of our religion’s impending death. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

While modernism experiences the death of God as trauma, an affront, a source of anguish as well as a cause for celebration, post-modernism does not experience it at all. There is no God-shaped whole at the centre of its universe...⁵

The post-modern world in which the believer finds himself is radically at odds with him. There is, between the secular public and the spiritual believer a distance not only ideological, but temporal. The two appear to represent different times in history. The *weltanschauung* of one seems entirely paradoxical to the other. The religious individual (and the faith to which he belongs) must face up to the uncomfortable reality that in this post-modern world, the language, the ideological vulgate as it were, of the Church is not understood or appreciated to the extent it once was in the public sphere. Many will lament such a twist of fate. Yet, I cannot help but see within it a providential call to reflect. For is it any wonder that the Church's potential to influence the volition of society has diminished, given that it has been torn asunder by the internal wranglings of factions (of all stripes), disgraced by the exposition of corruption and scandal, and deprecated by having consistently found itself on the losing side of the most modern moral debates. Ronald H. Preston was right to be concerned about this last phenomenon:

It is alarming that many of the most significant moral developments in [the 20th] century have begun largely outside the churches; the emancipation of women is an example.⁶

The Church of England may be the established Church, but its input in the debates of state has been largely reduced to a mere obligatory statement of half-hearted opposition (as was evinced in the events surrounding the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act of 2013). Similarly, the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, though officially opposing Amendment XV to the constitution which would remove the constitutional prohibition on divorce, found itself defeated in the aftermath of the 1995 referendum on the issue (and was subject to an even more crushing loss in the referendum on gay marriage in May 2015, when 62% voted in favour of its legalisation).⁷ At times in secular society, it can seem toxic, bigoted, and narrow-minded to take the position of the Churches on moral issues in the public arena.

I will examine the unsuccessful attempts of the Church to block such measures later, but for now it is important to note that the unfortunate knack which the Church has accrued to find itself on the losing side of an argument is not some fantastical example of *creatio ex nihilo*. No, there are excuses the public can reasonably present to defend their distrust of, and opposition to, the Church. The 2009 report of clerical abuse did untold damage to the image of the Catholic Church in Ireland, while of 164 complaints of abuse reported to MACSAS since September 2014, 136 of those were directed against the Church of England.⁸ The recent "Case of Joe", a fifteen year old abused by a senior figure in the Church of England in 1976, is an example of the complicity of some within the Church in utterly reprehensible acts of evil.⁹ With such heinous crimes being brought to light, all must understand the right of the public to be angry with the institutions of the Churches. The scandal is all the more significant given that it is perpetrated by, or within the confines of, the

⁵ Eagleton, Terry. *Culture and the Death of God*. London: Yale University Press, 2015. 186.

⁶ Preston, Ronald H. *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task*. London: SCM Press, 1983. 133.

⁷ RTE. <http://www.rte.ie/news/results/2015/referendum/ssm/>

⁸ ITV. 7th April, 2015. <http://www.itv.com/news/2015-04-07/dozens-of-historical-church-of-england-child-abuse-allegations-made/>

⁹ Sherwood, Harriet. *The Guardian*. 15th March, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/damning-report-reveals-church-of-england-failure-to-act-on-abuse>

Church (or its members). C.S. Lewis is right to insert into the mouth of his devil, Screwtape, the words:

All said and done, my friends, it will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by 'religion' ever vanishes from the Earth. It can still send us truly delicious sins. The fine flower of unholiness can grow only in the close neighbourhood of the Holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.¹⁰

For many, the words ring true. Religion has been plagued by hypocrisy since its inception; that is always the perilous position that a man-made establishment seeking to emulate the divine finds itself in. Yet, our current public sphere magnifies its criticism in reaction to the seventeen-hundred year dominance of Christendom, utterly crippling the self-esteem of the Church. They are right to do so – to call institutions which have failed so many into question – but it is the challenge of the Church to pick itself up, correct its mistakes, and regain the confidence of believer and unbeliever alike.

The final affront which blemishes the countenance of the Christian religion is undoubtedly the most ancient and the most ghastly. Disunity. “The Church” is almost an unfit title for the denominations of Christianity; one is compelled to use it only out of expediency. “The Church” papers over the cracks, smears over the discord which so frustratingly continues to render divided the religion which professes belief in one God and one Gospel of Salvation. Our “Church” might better be labelled our “Churches”. The divisions rife within Christianity have formed the most insurmountable of stumbling blocks to an articulated response to issues presented in the public sphere for centuries. Society has grown weary of our internal wranglings, and the dangers of religious division have been all too apparent to the generations of the 20th and 21st Centuries. From 1968 to 1998 Northern Ireland was engulfed in the bitter conflict of the Troubles, a struggle trenchantly borne out to a large extent by the acrimonious views held between Catholics and Protestants. Religion does not emerge from such a conflict unscathed, and those looking in from afar would have good reason to question purported goodness of religion as a whole.

A Prognosis for Recovery

What I shall attempt now is a prescription for how the Church might remedy the ailments which I have already identified it as having possessed above. In regards to the Church finding itself very consistently upon the losing side of modern moral debates, I believe there are several matters which need to be addressed. The Church’s PR in recent years has been about as effective as Satan’s or Judas Iscariot’s, and its image has suffered greatly as a result. The failures in recent public disputes of ethics have been due not only to the image which has developed in the public consciousness of the Church as an institution (or series of them) riven with division and scandal (which I will address soon), but also to ineffectual reasoning. I mentioned previously the gulf that exists between the mind of the faithful and the faithless. Religious reasoning is not applicable to the mind of the non-believer. It is, quite frankly, embarrassing when the religious individual seeks to defeat his secular or atheistic opponent with recourse to a language of faith which, in this relation, only he has real understanding of. How might the believer maintain the import of his religious

¹⁰ Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. London: Collins, 2012. 209.

conviction and at the same time convey his arguments in a manner suitable to an increasingly secular public sphere? I believe Esther McIntosh's claim that "religious reasons *supervene* on secular reasons"¹¹ is an appropriate position for the religious individual to take when putting his case forward in a moral debate within society. For in making this claim, the Christian is not demanding that society accept his dogma, but requesting that it respect his right to defend his belief, which though it may be influenced by religion, is not solely informed by it. He thus presents both a secular and a religious argument at once and at the expense of neither. Nonetheless, alongside this recognition of the need for religion to engage constructively and practically in secular debates, I consider a comprehensive public theology to be absolutely essential for the function of the Christian religion with regards to society's philosophical and ethical dilemmas. The faithful need to be aware and informed of their intellectual stances. Former Archbishop of York, John Habgood, wrote in his *Church and Nation in a Secular Age* that:

*Those temperamentally inclined to grasp conservative solutions need to know why they are being conservative on some issues, and what its limits are.*¹²

Such words encourage reflection upon the intellectual and academic aspects of the Christian faith itself, reflection that would not go amiss in a society in which few beliefs or ideologies go unchallenged. An informed and rational understanding of the faith and the positions it holds (one which can hopefully appeal even to the faithless) is utterly vital if the Christian is to present a sound case for his particular set of beliefs. If, as Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, it was "personal choice that defeated *Humanae Vitae*"¹³, then it might well be personal choice that brings others to believe in it. As *homo sapiens*, as "wise persons" or "thinking men", it is in our nature to weigh arguments. I have confidence that an appropriate and rational understanding of faith, implemented through a public theology which critically engages with current social concerns in politics, ethics, and economics, will adequately equip the Christian for any debate he may encounter in the public sphere. How do we prevent the Church finding itself on the losing side of the argument? The answer is simple. We need to *make* better debaters for its cause, and we make them by providing for the faithful a coherent public theology.

My second criticism of the Church which I believe has impinged upon its relations with the public has been its connivance in scandal. If the Christian religion wishes to be taken seriously in the public sphere again, it must do more than what Pope Benedict XVI did in 2010 in response to the reports of historical child abuse. Apologies are all well and good, but it is action that inspires confidence, and it is an active attempt by the Church to root out corruption and scandal within its walls that will earn it the respect of those with or without faith, who look up to it or who look in on it. If the Church wishes to safeguard its legacy as a force for good it is crucial that it shows repentance before society as a whole, and takes earnest steps towards ensuring that the evils enacted beneath it in the past are never repeated. I believe a full and frank disclosure of various denominations' less savoury aspects is vital if the conscience of Christ's *ekklesia* is to be cleared. Guilt weighs down every denomination of Christianity, encumbering the faith of every believer. It is time to lighten the load, to come clean, to wash away the blotches that have so shamefully stained our Church. With repentance comes belief in the Good News (Mark 1:15). Yes, Christ forged his Church for sinners, but only so that through it they might be made saints. Let this genuine attempt to correct the mistakes of the Church form a tangible, practical example of the moral application of

¹¹ McIntosh, Esther. "Philosophers, Politicians and Archbishops: Religious Reasons in the Public Sphere." *International Journal of Public Theology* Volume 2, Issue 4 (2008): 465-483. 481.

¹² Habgood, John. *Church and Nation in a Secular Age*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983. 176.

¹³ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *A History of Christianity*. London: Penguin Books, 2010. 988.

the public theology mentioned above. In seeking to improve itself and tear from its anatomy the cancers of corruption and scandal, the Church will deliver a powerful message to the faithful and the wider public, one which inspires confidence, admiration, and which will lay the foundation for a more operative liaison between it and the public sphere in future.

According to Matheson (paraphrased by Tinyiko Sam Maluleke), a public theology must be “more akin to poetry than prose – iconic, symbolic, outrageous, and imaginative”.¹⁴ Christianity, it seems, needs a new addition to its mythos – a new story of meaning. If this is the case, then the Church ought to have, as a goal, a defining moment of significance ahead of it with which to vindicate its mission before the public and renew the faith of its followers. Few dreams can be too grand for a religion holding sway over two billion people. Christianity needs to be bold in its ambition if it is to recapture the hearts, minds, and souls of society. I can already envision such a hope, and for me, it is very clear what the aspiration of the Church should be. The objective of the denominations of Christianity needs to be one which, when accomplished, will break with such force into the consciousness of the public sphere that the Church will again become a credible and efficacious force within society. What event, what great faith-affirming occurrence, could bring about this new modern day myth? Union, or rather, the reunion of the Church. An occasion imbued with a true ecumenical spirit, with the genuine desire to recognise that though “we are many [we] are one body in Christ” (Romans 12:5, see also 1 Corinthians 10:17), that could be the saving grace of the Christian religion, which as we have seen is so dangerously under threat of slipping into the seams of a secular society. Such a unity would be a testament to the immanence of the Church in public life, and, concomitant with my above suggestions for the improvement of the Christian faith, would function as new intersection between the face of God (his Church) and the face of government (its society). I cannot emphasise enough the imperative I believe circumstances have placed upon the Church for ecumenical union among its diverse factions. An event of such sweeping historic grandeur and glory would surely force itself to the forefront of the public consciousness, serving as the first great impetus behind the implementation of a public theology of the unified Church in society. How is a unified Church achievable? What means or methodology might bring it about? I recently inquired this of a leading Catholic Cardinal over dinner. The response I received was, I must admit, somewhat underwhelming; I believe the gist of it was that we ought to leave such things for the Holy Spirit to accomplish. With all due respect to His Eminence, though I am sure he did not mean it this way, I have always suspected such responses to be, in effect, “Let’s do nothing,” dressed up in ecclesiastical jargon. In defence of those who would rather do nothing to bring oneness to the Church, the task of achieving unity within it is immense, and its complexity ought to evoke feelings of dread. But expecting the Holy Spirit to descend from the clouds to bring oneness to the Church is not an appropriate response to the situation; it is a negation of response to the situation. For the Holy Spirit works within us, the believers. Ecumenism can indeed succeed, it can indeed inspire the public only by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that power is affected through us, the agents of the Holy Spirit. I do not despair that it will take a miracle to unite the Church – I rejoice that we *are* that miracle. The power to renew the *ekklesia* rests with its faithful adherents. With the potential that such a oneness promises for the restitution of respect for the faith in society at large, what believer could pass up the opportunity to struggle for reunion? The words of the hymnist Samuel J. Stone provide much hope to the believer who looks to that reunion:

*Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,*

¹⁴ Maluleke, Tinyiko Sam. “The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar.” *International Journal of Public Theology* Volume 5, Issue 1 (2011): 79-89. 81.

*By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!*

Letter of Discharge

The wit who proposed that one should give up religion when it starts to interfere with one's everyday life had it exactly wrong. It is when faith is bound up with one's everyday existence that it starts to matter.¹⁵

For me, this is the most poignant of Eagleton's affirmations in his *Culture and the Death of God*. It redirects us to the true significance of the faith as a life-effecting system of beliefs. The Church, the most tangible manifestation of faith for Christians, ought to be bound up with our everyday lives, and, as such, through us the Christian religion may continually affect its presence in the public sphere. Christianity has much to overcome in order to properly regain respect within wider Western society. Nevertheless, in the faith that it can and will do so, we might look forward to a new era of cooperative interface between Christianity and the societies in which it is embedded. An emphatic push toward ecumenical oneness would be a most inspiring and encouraging sight upon the world stage, symbolic in its effect upon Christians, admirable in its impact upon those of other faiths and none at all. Added to this the genuine desire to repent of the sins of the past, and the Church's engagement with our largely secular society could progress exponentially. A deeper, more respectful understanding can be developed by a rejuvenated, reunited Church and by the public of the Western world of which it is a part. Like any faction within society, Christianity will fight its corner and defend its interests in public deliberations on politics, economics, and ethics, but such debates need not lead to the acrimonious backbiting between spiritual and secular that has occurred in the past and does occur in the present. A serious and systematic public theology would ensure this, emphasising the intellectual rigour of the Christian faith. This is a hopeful scenario, I am aware, but not one beyond the bounds of achievement, and as such, I believe the Church has a duty to strive toward it, to carry the message of Christ not just to those within its walls, but to those beyond them also. That was the commission it was given, and if it even now desires to call itself *the* Church, then that is its commission still. That is the imperative placed upon it by Jesus: to carry the Good News within whatever society it abided. This is one such society, and thus, the Church here still has a mission to accomplish. That above all prefigures the relationship between the Christian religion and the public sphere. As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, I repeat once again: Christ does not bid his Church be silent.

¹⁵ Eagleton, Terry. *Culture and the Death of God*. London: Yale University Press, 2015. 199.

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