

RUNCIE LECTURE

MAY 5, 2011

Presented by

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The Runcie Convocation Lecture Series

In the spring of 2000, following the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Robert Runcie, the Foundation established The Lord Robert Runcie Convocation Lecture Series in honor and recognition of the loyalty and support he showed, as the head of the Church of England, to the Foundation's work in ministry education.

‘Ongoing Dialogue for the good of our civilisation’: The Legitimate role of religion in public life.

The Revd Dr Robin P. P. Gibbons

It is a great honour for me to be with you all and share with you my thoughts on the role and place of religion in the United Kingdom, Europe (and other areas of the world) today. The place of faith communities in the social and political life of a country was something that the Late Archbishop Robert Runcie understood well in his various ministries within the Church of England and also the Anglican Communion as a whole. As a Graduate of Trinity Hall Cambridge I discovered that Robert Runcie was once Dean and so in a collegiate sense of belonging to the same alma mater, I feel a more tangible link with him, though he was not Dean when I was there, I can also truthfully say many of his national sermons inspired me as a young priest. He was also the first Archbishop of Canterbury to welcome a Pope into Canterbury Cathedral, in 1982, where with the late (and now Blessed) Pope John Paul II they knelt together in prayer at the spot where St Thomas of Canterbury was martyred, a symbol of the clash between Church and State, and prayed for the unity of Christians and committed themselves and their respective Churches to the path of reconciliation and dialogue.

In his sermon on that occasion the Pope spoke these words; ~~love~~ love grows by means of truth, and truth draws near to man by means of love. Mindful of this I lift up to the Lord this prayer: O Christ may all that is part of today's encounter be born of the Spirit of truth and be made fruitful through love. These words were and are prophetic and touch profoundly one deep reason why religion is not something personal and private, for from the perspective of his Christian faith John Paul II tells us that faith is also about relationship and community, and the understanding of the Divine one, especially in the theological context and understanding of the Christian belief in a Triune God, places faith at the heart of what it means to be a social being. I remember that visit and it kindled

in me a desire to work for ecumenism which I have done ever since. But it also serves as a useful pointer to cultural shifts that have taken place, not only in the UK but Europe since that time. Firstly there is the positive aspect. At the time of JP II's visit to us in 1982 we were at war with Argentina and the visit was nearly called off, he never met the Prime Minister and anti-papal feeling emerged in the form of protestant agitation mainly by the Rev Ian Paisley and his bellicose concern that it was a plot to place protestant UK under the papal yoke. What I am trying to hint at is the historical sense of the UK as countries whose governor and traditions had become and were in a real political and social sense protestant. In other words, religion had a place in society and mattered. Secondly the visit, as a pastoral visit by the Pope, opened up British Catholicism to a wider stage and committed the Church to a greater pastoral dialogue with society, the Established Church and other faith communities. Contrast this with the visit last year of Pope Benedict XVI. This was a state visit although it had huge pastoral implications as well, but it is significant that political parties, members of the Government, the First Minister of Scotland and the Prime Minister were involved in the visit and met the Pope. He also met the Queen at Holyrood Palace Edinburgh. This all seems more positive than the 1982 visit, but the atmosphere had changed significantly. Unlike the charismatic Pope JP II the build up beforehand was significantly negative in tone and the National Secular Society and other prominent atheists and humanists, individually and in groups, objected strongly to his visit and the place it accorded a religious representative, especially of a Church mired in controversy over a number of moral and ethical issues. Nevertheless, in the end the visit was a success, partly due to the gentle charm and intellectual skills of the Pope, but also because he struck a chord with so many people. But the mood indicates a significant shift of perception.

The Pope's Address

In his historical address in Saint Stephen's Hall, the Palace of Westminster on the 17th September 2011, to parliamentarians and academics as well as other figures, Pope Benedict spoke about the need to place religion firmly within the

public square. Since I believe that what he said is of profound importance for European civilisation as well, I intend, if you can bear with me, to use some of his thoughts as a way of examining one of the big issues facing us at the beginning of the 21st century, that of the role of religion in society. Taking his cue from the Speaker of the House of Commons who had welcomed him and pointed out that Sir Thomas More (for the Catholics a martyred saint of the Reformation) was one of the 156 Speakers of the House of Commons, Benedict responded, by remarking on the fact that Britain was noted for its moderation and pluralist democracy and that in the perennial debate about allegiances to Caesar and God, More had chosen his conscience and God above the King. He made a significant allusion to similarities between Catholic social teaching and British democracy:

Britain places great value on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law, with a strong sense of the individuals rights and duties, and of the equality of all citizens before the lawⁱⁱ Catholic social teaching has much in common with this approach, in its overriding concern to safeguard the unique dignity of every human person, created in the image and likeness of God, and in its emphasis on the duty of civil authority to foster the common goodⁱⁱⁱ This was a singularly positive theological approach to several key questions facing us all and reminds me, as I hope it does you, that Theology, like Philosophy is an important ingredient in civilised intellectual discourse and societal reflection.

The starting point is one consideration all of us face, that we cannot ask the past to provide the answers, but rather we use the past as a rule or way to guide our deliberations for each generation must ask anew. In regards to issues facing us, a) what requirements can Governments reasonably impose on faith and other groups and individuals and how far do these requirements extend? b) What authority do people appeal to for the resolution of moral dilemmas? c) If social consensus is the only agreement, what challenges lie ahead for democratic process? And d) central to all these questions, where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? Part of his gift in offering these reflective questions, so to speak, was to remind us all that

behind the great values of our British democratic system were the foundational influence and historical presence of our Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is something that religious leaders both in local and European situations have reiterated time and time again. By asking these questions the Pope has cut to central issues that continually affect faith communities in the United Kingdom and also across Europe, but he has also carefully pointed out the delicate balancing act that any religious faith group must tread. This is significant for those of us who are engaged in theological reflection and the pursuit of ministry or engagement with people in the spiritual and religious dimensions of life. It is particularly apposite for those of you graduating with the GTF and its encompassing vision of continuing education. Why? Pope Benedict pointed out that in Catholic social teaching there are objective norms governing right action that are accessible to reason^{iv}, this places religion right at the heart of the search for truth.

Listening to divergent views

From this discussion several key points emerge that are essential for the future development of any faith group and its teaching methodology. At the heart of Christian theology the understanding of reason as a component of revelation and faith is indispensable, without it problems emerge in the expression and practice of faith and this is perhaps what one might term the problem area of religion especially in the context of dialogue with non-believers. Ann Hayman, The Speaker of the House of Lords responded to the Pope's address by reminding us all of the delicate process of democratic freedom; ^vin the House of Lords we much appreciate the religious voices that take part in essentially political debatesq discussions that ~~take~~ take place among views of other faiths and those who do not come from faith communities^v This means that no longer can any one religious group claim any divine hegemony over anybody else, the European Convention on Human Rights places limitations on religious expression maintaining the basic principle that a democratic society is one in which pluralism of belief is an essential feature!^{vi}In this sense it was wise of the Pope to stress that the role of religion in public life is not; a) to supply norms for the general population nor to, b)

propose concrete political solutions that are outside of the competence of religion but rather to c) supply what can be called a 'corrective role' to help purify and shed light on the application of reason in ethical and moral issues. In this way religion can help form a moral approach based on fundamental values but cannot legislate for it! It is this deeply theological role that gives witness to what we will call the transcendent values of the Divine in our world: 'The Church does however have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man(sic), to his dignity, to his vocation. Without truth, it is easy to fall into an empiricist and sceptical view of life, incapable of rising to the level of praxis because of a lack of interest in grasping the values-sometimes even in the meanings-with which to judge and direct it. Fidelity to man (sic) requires *fidelity to the truth*, which alone is the *guarantee of freedom* (cf Jn 8:32) and of *the possibility of integral human development*'.^{vii}

Though the language is typically Vaticanese, the points made are crucial, in a pluralist society the Church (and other faith communities) have a role to play in reminding the world of 'other' values, the value which in the gospel of John places Christ as the way, the truth and the life of the Christian community, but also acknowledges the search for truth at the heart of all great religions. Nevertheless, at the same time all faith groups (as well as others) need to actively and constantly remember their own history, good and bad, and consistently examine the distortions within their institutions and congregations, those such as sectarianism and fundamentalism. These have created, and still create, serious historical and political problems, Benedict sees this as coming from 'insufficient attention' to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion, besides applying reason to the religious context the two way process gives religion a role where it can also help sort out the implications of 'reason' which, in turn can also be manipulated into ideologies that are as totalitarian as any fundamentalism or applied in a partial manner which masks serious inequalities within society.

From the Eastern Christian tradition (both Orthodox and Catholic) which has had more than its fair share of persecution and deprivation during the 20th

century, the voice of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has consistently spoken out for freedom and consideration of our finely tuned world and recently reminded everyone, in the context of the Japanese earthquake and Tsunami of April 2011, that reason itself has limitations it cannot find the answer to every issue and this is where religion plays its part as a corrective.^{viii} His words, as also the words of the Dalai Lama speak from a position of immense spiritual power, more important because they both have seen much suffering, persecution and loss of place, status and power from totalitarian ideologies and regimes that sought the destruction of their faith. As if echoing Pope Benedict's warnings, the Patriarch also reminds us of the dangers of reducing religion to the merely personal, individual position. In another address at the Orthodox Service for the United Nations Community in New York 2009 he said, ~~u~~where there is oppression or limitation of religious freedom, there is almost always violation in other core traditions that are the hallmark of healthy democracies^{ix} This is something that might seem far removed from the countries that you or I inhabit, but there is a danger that any form of marginalisation, in the name of freedom, may bring about this unbalanced state of affairs. In his address the Pope echoed the growing fears of many when he gently postulated that the world of reason and the world of faith need one another, and need to enter into a profound dialogue. He and many others are concerned that the position of religion and in particular Christianity is being marginalised in many and subtle ways especially in public manifestations such as Christmas^x or when faith people in public roles are placed in the difficult position of having to act against their conscience. Religion is and should not be a problem to solve but a contributor to healthy democratic life.

Problems of Freedom and Religion in the UK and Europe

In recent years the European Human rights Act (also known as the Convention) of 1998 has been applied in the member States of Europe, it came into force in the UK in 2000. Article 9 of that Convention states:
~~E~~Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom either

alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance^x. This is laudable and appears at first glance to give faith communities and individuals a secure place, but, and here is where the Act itself has proved to be problematic, the following section places limitations by allowing the State regulation: Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of rights and freedoms of others^{xii} But as two lawyers from the Association of Muslim Lawyers in the UK point out, the principle here is the assumption that the society in which this operates is a truly democratic and in which pluralism of belief is an essential feature.^{xiii} But Article 17 adds a problem by preventing any person exercising a right so to act to deny any other person the ability to exercise any other right under the Convention. What this means is that religious freedom is exercised within these limitations, the right to respect for private or family life (Article 8), the freedom of expression within the scope of the Convention (Article 10) and the freedom of assembly (Article 11) and in practice this has given rise to a very complex situation in which the individual right of a person is often pitted against a majority, but also the desire to maintain legitimate pluralism frequently wins out against minorities.

The big question facing us is just how can the Human rights Act really provide adequate and positive protection to religious groups? I am not a lawyer, but in the years following the Act, whilst there have been reasonable decisions concerning public safety, order and morals, such as the demand that Sikhs wear proper helmets on motorcycles, the case of a high caste Hindu prisoner being made to clean his own cell for issues of public health and the safety considerations of keeping Stonehenge closed in the face of Druidic religious opposition, many problematic decisions have been arrived at, which whilst not infringing the Convention have severely discriminated against faith groups, recent examples such as the right of an employee to wear a cross, the restriction of public manifestations of religious cult. The growth of

an aggressive secularism in the press and media, the issue of Hijab and face coverings for Muslim women, the crucifix in Italian public schools and very recently and rather sadly, the closure of Catholic Adoption agencies in England who, by not allowing adoption by homosexual couples, were seen to infringe the rights of a minorities freedom. Though the press has touted this as an issue of an example of Catholic opposition to Gays (which betrays a real lack of understanding of ecclesial teaching) this is not a simple issue of discrimination but much more complex, as so many of these issues are. I can point out that Catholic Adoption Agencies often deal with the most vulnerable children in society which means that the most stable environment for these damaged children often needs to be in a situation of male female partnership and that far from excluding homosexual adoption; the Church exercised a careful right of scrutiny. Of course there are harmful activities that often get covered by the term ~~religion~~ and in all faith communities there are negative examples of discrimination, aggressive proslyetism, oppression and sinful activity, but that does not exclude the immense good that faith communities do and give witness to.

This brings us back to that ~~corrective~~ of truth and reason so essential for a religious communities growth but also the absolute necessity for informed and public theology to be at the heart of any discourse. Church and religious leaders are well aware of the dangers that face us, whilst they are often condemned for overstating the case, it does remain the case that in the UK and Europe the neglect and marginalisation of the Christian tradition (which sometimes masquerades for an implicit fear of Islamic militancy) cause grave concern.^{xiv} Here is the Pope again echoing the thoughts of many in an address to the Diplomatic Corps on January 22nd 2011: ~~Even~~ less justifiable are attempts to counter the right of religious freedom with other alleged new rights, which, while actively promoted by certain sections of society and interested in national legislation or in international directives are nonetheless merely the expression of selfish desires lacking a foundation in authentic human nature^{xv} Cardinal Keith O'Brien, Britain's senior Catholic Church leader has been a constant critic of these attempts to circumscribe religion, in

March 2009 he attacked the Embryology Bill for giving little hope and a bleak future for human life in the future and his Easter Sermon (19th April 2011) was a vehement attack on the aggressive secularism present in our society, the Discrimination and Equality Bill which he said marginalised Christians. All the main religious leaders are concerned with the recent issues of Euthanasia, the Assisted Suicide debate, the Right to Die and of course concern for those vulnerable people in society. It is a bleak picture and I must nail my colours to the mast and say that without religion life would have unbelievable pressures implicit especially for those unable to speak out for themselves. The Archbishop of Canterbury often reminds us that religion is about true humanism, a passionate commitment to the dignity of all human beings and asks that those of faith have a readiness to respond to the various trends in our cultural environment that seek to present Christian faith both as an obstacle to human freedom and a scandal to human intellect^{xvi} But how are we, both you and I in our respective cultures to engage with this public debate and offer that corrective of love and truth?

Local Initiatives: The Centre for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Kellogg College Oxford

You are here with family and friends to graduate from various degree programmes offered by the GTF, without pre-empting tomorrow, may I wish you every blessing for your future, using in a proactive way the knowledge and understanding you have gained. I recently reviewed a collection of Essays in honour of Max L. Stackhouse, Public Theology for a Global society in which one of the essays makes a strong plea for Public Theology, taking theological debate and discourse into the market place. One of the starting points for hope, is a sober reminder that whatever secularists may think, the largest of the world's religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc are global institutions, with transnational memberships and common basic ethical ideas...Through conversation, mutual aid, shared experiences, members of diverse religious communities can come to understand themselves as peacemakers with one another, for the purposes of overcoming ethnic and national strife, and envisioning the prospect of global interreligious

cooperation^{xvii} Not only that they have a history and wisdom to share. This means that each one of us needs to really root ourselves in the best of our tradition, for as the late Theologian Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Russian orthodox Bishop of Sourozh and Great Britain used to preach, one can only dialogue in love and ecumenism when one loves one's own tradition. For me this means an understanding of Christianity and a rediscovery of the core of my tradition that "Christ takes away nothing that pertains to human freedom or dignity or to the building of a just society"^{xviii} But despite our own local faith communities how can we engage, make sure that ways of bearing witness to the transcendent dimension of life, to a call to holiness and virtue in personal and social lives, what we can call the restorative and transformative love of God reflected in us? The first way of ecumenism is the gift of true friendship and that means being true to ourselves and as the Archbishop of York so clearly put it making sure that, "equality is not my right over another-equality is about reflecting a person's equal worth and value and importance to God"^{xix}

However we need platforms for discussion and also arenas which have a neutral quality so that different groups may feel comfortable in discussion and dialogue. At Oxford we have for over 100 years had a great tradition of academic outreach beyond the University in my Department for Continuing Education and out of that work Kellogg College was founded for Post Graduates, both part-time and full time in 1990. For several years it has begun to forge its own independent identity and a part of its contribution to the Wider Academic world several Centres have been founded.

In 2008, Canon Vincent Strudwick and myself presented an idea of a Centre devoted to the study of religion to the Governing Body and this was accepted, and so the Kellogg College Centre for the Study of Religion in Public life was inaugurated, its founding executive Committee comprised of Professor Roger Trigg, Academic Director, myself as Administrative Director, Vincent Strudwick, Basil Mustafa from the Islamic Centre and Jitka Fort the College's Development Officer. It is our hope that we will keep the place of religion firmly in the public space through our academic work. We are also very fortunate to have the support of the GTF who have generously endowed an

annual Lecture in Religion and Public Life in honour of Vincent Strudwick, who like myself has a deep and abiding association with the GTF. The first one, given by Lord Harries of Pentreath took place last year. We are also very involved in publications, lectures and seminars but also have a group of associate scholars involved in various works. The problem is as always finance, but we give of our time in kind, Roger Trigg is now involved in a project for Templeton with Georgetown University to examine Religious Freedom and we are about to put forward a bigger bid which will also include myself to examine in detail issues of Religious Freedom and Diversity in Europe. Hopefully this will give us some income, but nevertheless we are still examining other works one such is my own suggestion for examining the role of the Religious Practitioner in the Media an area I feel passionate about. The important issue is that we act as a neutral place, bringing to the table people of faith and none, but in friendship and openness. I hope you will feel interested enough to follow our work as it grows; we are philosophers, historians, sociologists and theologians, cooperating together. As Voltaire said, words alone are not enough to improve the world, but they can have an extraordinary impact!

Our work in the Centre is an academic way, important for the hosting of words, ideas and persons, but each one of you is important in this work of making sure religion part of the dialogue of humanity. How you achieve this depends on where you are and what you are doing, but I give you three ways suggested by Patriarch Bartholomew: a) be responsible for God's created order as true *oikonomos*, keepers of our house (*oikos*). B) Place in your lives the absolute centrality of religious freedom, the first freedom that is central to human personhood which is linked to true religious liberty and c) be of service to humanity without expectation of anything in return.^{xx} Two last words, one from Archbishop John Sentamu, "God wants spiritual fruits rather than religious nuts!"^{xxi} The other from the Speaker of the House of Commons - "A very difficult past, and a turbulent present, need not be a barrier to an enlightened future" a reminder that what we need and what our Centre can give and you can do is be facilitators of "respectful debate"

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- ⁱ Saturday 29th May 1982
- ⁱⁱ Address, September 17th 2011
- ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*
- ^{iv} *Ibid* see also Benedict XVI Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* June 29 2009 Rome 26-29..
- ^v Ann Hayman Response Westminster Hall 17 September 2010
- ^{vi} *European Convention on Human Rights 199.8 Article 9(2)*
- ^{vii} *Caritas in Veritate 9*
- ^{viii} Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: *Address to the People of Japan and the World.* Phanar, Istanbul. 14th April 2011
- ^{ix} Patriarch Bartholomew: Address at the 9th Annual SCOBA/SCOCH UN Prayer Service, New York, Orthodox Cathedral 26 Oct 2009
- ^x Partial understanding about religion gives rise to some ill advised attempts to curtail Christmas and replace it with a non-denominational celebration often citing the pluralism of religions and their needs as a reason. As has so often been pointed out by other faith groups, it is important that Christianity retain its place in the public setting of civil life and celebration, for this also means that they too will be allowed to celebrate their festivals in freedom. It is also noticeable in the UK of the convergence of agreement between the various faith groups and the position of the Anglican Church as a political vehicle in the State apparatus for voicing concerns and expressions of national life.
- ^{xi} *European Convention on Human Rights*, Human Rights Act 1998 (England in 2000) Article 9:1
- ^{xii} Article 9,2.
- ^{xiii} Jonathan Cooper, Human Rights Project Director and Justice Martyn McLeish, Barrister. *Religious Freedom Under The Human Rights Act 1998.* The Association of Muslim Lawyers, 8 Store Buildings London. Article found on www.aml.org.uk
- ^{xiv} The German Six Theses which propose a secularist nation independent of Christianity is a recent example of a culture war (Nov 2010) and are a direct challenge to the heritage of Judeao-Christianity as a lead culture, the proposal met with severe opposition but is only one of many examples across Europe.
- ^{xv} Pope Benedict XVI Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 22nd 2011 Vatican Rome
- ^{xvi} Archbishop of Canterbury, Address to Pope Benedict XVI 17th September 2011 Lambeth Place, London
- ^{xvii} Scott R Paeth, *Religious Communities and Global civil Society: Moral Formation and Interreligious Cooperation in a Pluralistic Context* in Deidre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth Eds 2010 *Public Theology for a Global Society. Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse.* Eerdmans.p159
- ^{xviii} Inaugural Homily of Pope Benedict XVI, St Peter's Basilica, Rome. 24 April 2005.
- ^{xix} John Sentamu. Article. *Be proud of Our Nation at Easter.* National Express.14 April 2011.
- ^{xx} Patriarch Bartholomew SCOBA/SCOCH address 26 October 2009
- ^{xxi} John Sentamu art Cit