

The need for Christian political discourse

‘Talk organizes the world’ – said discourse theorist David Silverman. By the same token, lack of talk – or of the right talk – apparently allows it to go to hell in a handcart. Discourse means ‘talk about talk’. Talk also acts. If we exclude certain forms of talk from our public life, we distort our humanity, rule out a certain kind of knowing, and render our interventions clumsy and wide of the mark. God talk has been excluded from the main forums of our society for well-intentioned reasons. The liberal project of public neutrality/private faith, while well-meaning as a way of circumnavigating the roots of religious war, has had devastating implications for the poor both in Britain and abroad.

If talk about talk – our discourse - excludes the religious and spiritual dimension of our humanity, that dimension will not simply disappear – it will be reinterpreted in ways that cause more problems. Take current talk about African witchcraft for example. They call witches *kindoki* in Kinshasa. In London they’re called evangelical Christians!

You’ve probably heard about the bogus pastors in Congo and Angola who starve, beat, cut and kill children who are claimed to be possessed. The *Evening Standard* headline screamed ‘Boys Are Being Murdered As Human Sacrifices In London Churches’. ‘They are brought into the capital to be offered up in rituals by fundamentalist Christian sects’ . . . it went on.

Dr Richard Hoskins, Lecturer in African Religion at the London School of Economics, was the ‘expert witness’, in the Child B case. He made a film called ‘Witch Child’. He also failed to discriminate between Christianity and traditional religion. He filmed a traditional healer happily sitting under a tree – all very idyllic. Then cut to a new evangelical Christian church [cue footage of vigorous arm waving congregants; sinister music; weird camera angles]. Christianity is easy to misrepresent when your discourse holds that all religions are equal – and that they are all equally irrelevant, backward or sinister. The future for multi-racial Britain is not good if

African Pentecostals - and there will be more than 70,000 of them in Britain by 2010 - are all identified with *kindoki*.

You may think I exaggerate - yet an *Anglican* church in Tottenham has refused to let out its hall to a Congolese group it was previously happy to accommodate - simply because they are Congolese.

Secularization – the draining away of a sense of the transcendent from the operation of the social system - has been a feature for around the same amount of time that Britain has been a post-colonial power. It affects how we know the world. To divest ourselves of responsibility for the empire seemed to mean divesting ourselves of responsibility to know anything real about the world any longer. We slipped into a wilful ignorance about cultures and the religions they are constructed around. We stuck our heads in the sand adopting what one scholar has called ‘purposive non-discourse’. ‘There are things we do not wish to know’, one government minister told academics at a conference on English law and the informal establishment of the shariah in Britain.

We allowed ourselves to be bullied by the phoney semantics of the Marxist atheist dialectic. It gave us easy binary language that made us feel good about our social ethic - ‘black-white’; ‘oppressor-oppressed’. All migrants were politically ‘black’ - even the Irish. The specificities of religion and culture were ruled out.

Muslims fought back against being used by the left for their own ends. And Tariq Modood’s research - known as the Fourth Survey - helped turn the tide of the race discourse, insisting that most Asians and particularly Muslims conceived of their identities in religious rather than racial terms. Had there been genuine concern for migrants to Britain, the facts of religious life would not have taken 40 years to percolate into the bloodstream of government business, as indeed was the case.

It was only in 1994 that the then Health Minister Paul Boateng, concerned about the collapse of social work in the inner cities, launched a book published by the Social Work Training Council entitled *Visions of Reality: Religion and Ethnicity in Social Work*. A young Hindu contributor chillingly observed: ‘Today people in this so-called caring profession are wary of terms such as love, kindness and compassion because of their religious connotations.’ A public neutrality about religion that separates public policy from private reality apparently also separates the head from

the heart. If social work has to exclude the religious discourse that originally inspired it¹ what is left is intervention and control: policing in a word.

The book advocated a new religious awareness as ‘a tool’ in the delivery of social care. Society is de-secularizing.

That book was just part of a wider change triggered by the work of the little known Inner Cities Religious Council, whose discourse I researched for six years! This was a body of spokesmen from five major faiths, put together at the suggestion of a Government Minister and Lambeth Palace to be a point of contact with urban areas that were becoming increasingly anarchic and beyond the reach of the State. It was served by a secretariat in the Department of the Environment known as the ‘Faiths Unit’. Its existence marked a turning point in allowable discourse. Government woke up to the fact that inner-city citizens were religious.

It became *racist* not to acknowledge religion. Sweeping concessions were made up and down the country to minorities on the basis of their faith ‘needs’. Faith groups were for the first time recognized in law. I coined the expression ‘new religious discourse’ to describe the new ‘talk about talk’ that permitted religious belief to become a factor in legislation and government process. We hear it everywhere – we’re uncomfortable with it. Faith crimes? Hazel Blears touring the country ingratiating herself with politically acceptable imams and so on?

The fact is globalisation now means we have to think a lot harder about the spirituality of the world’s people:

a) It is not possible to govern without an adequate religious lexicon
and

b) it is hugely wasteful to try to implement any agenda, whether inner-city, national or international - on secular terms alone.

¹ ‘Social work practice began in religious activities for charity and social justice. As social work has aspired to professional status grounded in scientific knowledge and method, so it has distanced itself from religion. The profession’s struggle to give its activities a solid rationale has in its wake de-emphasised religion and its relevance to social work practice.’ p. 9

As an example of this first point, what keywords do you use to try and research from various local authority and police databases how many children may have been violently exorcised?

By way of illustration of the second point, I turn to Northern Uganda.

The Acholi people of Northern Uganda, tormented for 20 years by Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army; 1.6million of them now crammed into concentration camps, kept alive by food aid, but unable to advocate for themselves, or participate in the international discourse because their intellectuals have all fled - and those that remain - the Anglican and Catholic bishops - have little room at the table of realpolitik.

The Church Mission Society started a campaign to 'break this silence'. CMS took the Gospel and education to Northern Uganda 100 years ago. We organized a petition and got Acholi refugee children and the brave Bishop of Kitgum - a former herdsman - to hand it in to Downing Street. This was radical for a mission society, breaking the political quarantine. By the end of two years of very hard and unfamiliar work involving more than 400 churches up and down the country, the war was not over, and the camps are still intact and very very deadly. BUT - what we did achieve, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was to 'greatly increase political activity'. The UN increased the number of offices in the north of Uganda fourfold - and tripled the aid budget. Museveni criticized CMS in the *Vision* newspaper - a great honour. Perhaps most significantly, an Acholi activist went on record as saying: 'When I saw the photographs of the bishop at Downing Street, I thought, humanity speaks with one voice now.'

Hear that. Humanity *speaks* . . . our common discourse, the discourse of faith reached the parts that secular discourse had failed to reach. Vertical and horizontal networks of historic solidarity united the people of the remotest most abandoned wilderness in the world with the office of the Prime Minister of Britain, through the mediation of ordinary church networks – and it changed things a little.

All this was put into further perspective for me at a meeting of various Commonwealth officials and media to brainstorm after the most recent CHOGM in Malta last year. That meeting had decided to set up a Multi-Faith Advisory Group following 9/11. A senior executive in the Political Affairs Division of the

Commonwealth Secretariat said this was ‘perhaps the most significant new departure in Malta.’ In the post 9/11 world - ‘Tolerance: ‘Where do we take it? We’ve got to report back, but . . . We have no guidance on this. We do not have the language . . .’

Secularization – the draining of the transcendent from our discourse sometimes looks like a particularly English form of politesse. We don’t talk about religion and sex in the club. But that now seems quaint and inappropriate. It is construed by Muslims as collusion with secular power. And rightly so, for that is what it is. In fact, that is precisely what fuels the Muslim resurgence. Muslims believe that we have destroyed our religion and our God – and that therefore all religions are at risk. It is because they consider us UN-believers that they challenge us. Secularity – the negligibility of God as Kenneth Cragg called it – is their biggest nightmare.

We can – and are changing. The precedents are there. Consider the fruitless secular approach to health development and AIDS. DfID last year commissioned research at Birmingham called ‘Faiths in Development.’ It has been funded to ‘take faiths seriously: understanding the relationships between values and beliefs, societies, states and development.’ This has emerged in part from the work of the Africa Commission – whose Head of Secretariat Myles Wickstead also drafted the first Government White Paper on Development published in 1997.

A couple of paragraphs in the Africa Commission Report are telling:

Those who ignore culture are doomed to failure in Africa. The outsiders who ran a workshop on AIDS in Angola recently learned that. They came to pass on their knowledge about transmission and prevention. They left having obtained new understandings of cultural practices such as initiation rites, scar-tattooing, blood brother practices, means of breaking the umbilical cord, polygamy and traditional marriage and healing practices. Only then did they come to understand why their education and awareness programmes had not resulted in higher use of condoms or lowered rates of infection. They had not known enough about local cultural norms and values on sexuality.

Unless those who shape Africa’s development make this integral to the way they formulate their policies they will fail. The report recognizes that the West must increasingly take religion into account in Africa . . . An appreciation of the role of religion in African life will require some fundamentally different approaches by the international community’ (p.29).

Money – and good intentions alone - can solve little.

I have one final story to illustrate this - and as a perhaps needful corrective to all this talk about talk. As Andrew Walker warns, in his marvellous book *Telling the Story*: ‘If we cannot demonstrate the proof of our story by living it, we will never convince people of its truth by talking about it.’

My story concerns lavatories.

A Canadian missionary called Doug Curry, attempted in the early 1990s to pioneer development in Okharpatha in the valley of the most remote tributary of the Karnali River in Northwest Nepal. This is a place beyond the reach of motor cars; a place of the little known Bon religion, on the trade route to the great sacred Mount Kailash, where yak trains pass with their cargoes of salt and apricots; a place where child sacrifice is still practised. Just before I visited, Doug had seen a boy running through the village bleeding. The gods required a child to bleed to death to make the rains come.

Even to defecate twice in the same place has until very recently angered the local gods in Jumla. One must try and understand the socialisation of fear – and its impact on health and prosperity. You do not simply dismiss it with your rationalisations – as my story shows.

Doug, who headed up the United Mission to Nepal’s work in the Jumla valley spent three years doing nothing at all – before beginning his work. He lived among the people. They thought he was an idol smuggler. He did not try to convert them, or impose any agenda. He built a relationship with them. One day the headman asked him to build him a latrine, having seen Doug using the one he had built for himself, with no ill-effect.

The Government’s own latrine-building drive in the hills had failed, because it was imposed from the top by secular aid workers in cahoots with government bureaucrats. The people were not going to risk the anger of the gods, without the protection of a stronger god.

With level ground to build on at a premium, the exercise involved Doug manhandling the sludge out of the old pit, witnessed by the entire village, and rebuilding on the same spot.

It was Good Friday. The headman asked why he was doing this for him? Doug drew a parallel with the Easter story: of a God who had given His life to lift mankind out of the pit of death and who had taken our stinking sin away.

Latrines are now a common sight in the valley.

Secularization has been compounded and energized by secularism – the ideologically-driven attempt to root out religion, the opium of the masses, from the public life and language of the Western world. But it has back-fired. It is now the masses who are suffering. If you “do not have the language” – you cannot hear or know what people are saying. You cannot understand their motivations; you cannot enter into their fear of the unseen – and the etymological root of the word evil is ‘unseen’. Likewise, you cannot plan for the fullness of human aspiration.

Secularization exists as a discipline in the *mind*. The project of political liberalism was the hope that, given the differences about matters of ultimate significance – about truth - we could nonetheless find some way of living together that avoided having to enforce one or other truth as the ‘right’ one. Not true, but true for you. It was the hope that reasonable people might be able to devise for themselves ‘a core morality’ without reference to any transcendent legitimation for it, which is at the root of controversy. This inevitably *requires* the public/private distinction. The ‘fact’ of secularization is both bound up with and a prerequisite of the possibility of ‘neutrality’: it becomes a political convenience that religions are in decline and are content to be privatised. Islam will not buy into that, particularly because of secularism’s association with female sexual anarchy. And the poor do not have the luxury of a choice. By helpfully acquiescing in the stripping of our public language of words about ultimate meaning – by playing our part in the liberal project in other words - Christians have lived out a self-denying ordinance. Secularization is not a fact but a self-fulfilling prophecy. The church actually seems to believe in it!

I was struck only this week by the language used in a article by Jonathan Petre in the *Daily Telegraph*. It reported that vicars are offering a free service of blessing to home owners . . . The vicar quoted said he was ‘confident that it will show that Christianity can adapt to an “increasingly secular age”’. Increasingly? Who says so? Not according to my research.

He said ‘There is *still* a huge interest in spirituality’ – as if it surprised him. This society is as secularized as we allow it to be. Spirituality may now be merely a lifestyle issue here – but for the poor everywhere and ultimately for all of us, it is of course, a matter of life and death.