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What is Culture?

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We all of us are familiar with the statement that we are now in a missionary situation, and it is a much more difficult missionary situation than most around. As you know I have spent most of my life as a missionary in India, at a time when the church is growing, when there were new churches being dedicated every few weeks, not because of any specific evangelistic programmes, but simply because the church was expanding, because people were telling each other the Good News of Jesus and this is happening, as we know, in very many parts of the World, and it does not happen here. Why is that so? Not because the Christians here are a lower calibre than the ones in South India or Africa or wherever. There are thousands of devoted Christians in every part of these Islands. Some of them sober and strait-laced, some of them charismatic and noisy, but all of them devoted to our Lord and eager to spread his Word. And yet we make so little impression on our culture. We are (and I think one has to accept the fact that the answer is, not any kind of personal defect of the Christian community in this land, although God knows that we have plenty of defects) living in what the sociologists call a "plausibility structure" which simply makes the Christian faith implausible.

The sociologist Peter Berger uses this phrase "plausibility structure", which is I think a very helpful phrase, to describe the structure of practices and beliefs which in any society determines whether a belief is plausible or not. We live in a society in which it is simply implausible that the great reality with which we have to deal all the time is God, that God has acted decisively in the incarnation and death and resurrection of Jesus in such a way as to determine all truth and all reality for all time to come, and that human life in every day of it is the incredible adventure of

living between the possibilities of an unimaginable glory and an appalling catastrophe. The "plausibility structure" in which we live is one which simply makes it, yes it can be a private opinion, but it is simply not something which governs public life. Of course it leaves room for Christians as a matter of personal belief to believe these things, but it does not allow Christianity to have a place in what you may call public doctrine. If I may use just one little illustration which I owe to Dan Beeby, a recent conversation with a devout Christian lady who was a psychiatrist by profession. She was asked whether her psychiatry helped her in her Christian life, and she said "Yes." She was asked whether her Christianity helped her in her psychiatry, whether she could bring her Christian insights to bear in the consulting room. And she answered, "Of course not! That would be unprofessional conduct!" It is not acceptable conduct. One can bring certain other sets of beliefs (and of course you cannot speak without bringing beliefs into the consulting room). You can bring quite a range of beliefs but this set of beliefs is excluded. It is not permitted, it is unprofessional. Now that is just one illustration of a vast range of issues upon which you could make the same point. – Now the foreign missionary has a much easier task when he is seeking to communicate the Gospel to the community to which he goes because he sees or she sees that culture with fresh eyes. Sees things which the natives have never seen because they are how things always are and anybody but a fool knows that is how things are. But in this case we are the natives and it is very much more difficult for us to see these elements in the plausibility structure which has shaped all of us from our infancy right through the whole of our intellectual and spiritual formation. It is very difficult indeed.

How is it to be done?

One way is of course to use the imagination, I like to think of the possibility that a tribe in the mountains of Papua New Guinea who had never met anyone from this part of the world, and were told that there existed a tribe of people with white skin who believed that the whole cosmos came into existence by a series of accidents and that it functions like a machine designed by nobody to fulfill no purpose. They would surely say they must be very superstitious people. But that is what in fact is taught in a vast amount of what goes on in our educational system. That is one way.

Another way is to go back and see how we came to hold these views and I want just to mention three names that I think are significant in that history. This is only one way of getting at it, but I personally find it helpful. The first is the name of Francis Bacon, the Morning Star before the dawning of the modern world. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, Bacon is the originator of the concept of 'fact' in its modern sense. MacIntyre says that 'fact' in the English language is a folk concept with an aristocratic ancestry. The aristocrat being Bacon. Bacon advised his contemporaries to eschew speculation and collect facts. By speculation he meant the universals with which medieval philosophy dealt. He dismissed all of these except one, the concept of cause. The concept of purpose belonged to the area of speculation. The writers Adorno and Horkheimer in their book on 'The Dialogue of Enlightenment' say that he retained only the concept of cause because it was susceptible of scientific investigation. You cannot undertake an empirical investigation of purpose but you can investigate cause. And if you follow that line then the conclusion follows that if you have understood the cause of a thing, you have understood what makes it work - what makes it happen. You have understood it. You have explained it. And two enormous consequences follow from that - firstly, that if purpose is not something which belongs to the actual nature of things (if they do not exist for any end, but are therefore, available for any use that one may choose) and if one has discovered the way that cause operates in this entity, then you are in a position of course to interfere and to manipulate things according to the purposes which you yourself may entertain. So knowledge is power, the great slogan of Bacon. And here you have the germ of the whole modern enormous development of technology, of a society where science is not primarily concerned about "How do we know the truth?" but about "How do we find the means for manipulating the world?" Science becomes auxiliary to technology. So you have the situation, which is I think brilliantly described in a book by the Chinese theologian, Carver Yu (who is deeply versed in Chinese philosophy and also a good Christian theologian). He

has written a book looking at our western culture from the angle of a Chinese. And he sums it up in two phrases "technological optimism", "literary despair". When he looks at our technology he sees the unbounded optimism of those who are convinced that you know there is no problem that cannot be solved, there is nothing for which we cannot find the means of doing it. But if you ask what is worth doing, what purposes are worth pursuing, then there is only silence, or nihilism, or despair. He looks at our literature, our drama and finds only emptiness. So we have become brilliant in devising means for doing whatever we might want, but dumb as regards determining the purposes for which it is worth while developing these means. And so we have a loss of basis for any decision about what purposes are worth doing. I cannot help thinking of the incredibly brilliant technology that brings us satellite television, in order to pour a cataract of trash into our living rooms. But that is the culture that Carver Yu sees when he looks at us.

The second consequence of Bacon's move, is that you have opened a chasm – and here of course I am coming to very familiar stuff – you have opened a chasm between fact, as so understood, and value, because if things are only understood by understanding their causes, and if the ends for which things exist, the purposes for which they exist are not available to knowledge and do not form part of the explanation, then it follows that from a statement of fact "This is the case," you cannot move to a statement of value "This is good."

You can only do so if you know what the purpose of that thing, the real proper end of that thing is. A thing may be good for one purpose and bad for another. Macintyre uses the illustration of the watch. He takes the sentence "This watch has not lost ten seconds in two years" a factual statement (untrue unfortunately but factual) and says it is reasonable to conclude it is a good watch, but only provided you understand a watch as something which is designed not to throw at the cat and not to decorate the sitting room but to keep time. If your definition of watch does not include any definition of the ends for which it exists, the purpose for which it exists, then from the factual statement you cannot derive a valued judgement. You cannot say good or bad if you know nothing of the ends for which things exist. And so we have the two cultures in C P Snow's work. The great split down our culture, between what happens in the science faculties and what happens in the arts and humanities faculties. Between a public world of what are called facts, which are a matter of public doctrine, where you know and then a private world of beliefs, about what may be judged to be values, which are a matter of personal choice. It is a matter for each one to decide what are the values that they will cherish and seek to realise. And so, in the whole of our educational system you have statements about how human life is caused to happen, as fact. That the human life is decided by the programme encoded on the DNA molecules is fact. But questions about the destiny of human beings, "What is the chief end of man?" in terms of the old Scottish catechism, these are not matters for public doctrine, these are matters for private opinion. And therefore, inevitably you have this chasm between fact and value. We may claim to know as fact where human life has come from, although our theories are highly debatable, but about where human life is going, there is no public doctrine available. That is the second consequence of the Bacon move. And we see these two consequences reinforce one another, because if purpose, the ends for which things exist, are not part of their nature, if the only purposes are the purposes that we entertain and if things are to be understood only in terms of causation, then we are free to employ our own purposes in manipulating nature. And you have this fundamental element that has gone right through our culture, that knowledge is power and that the power to dominate nature, the power to dominate, to control becomes the very heart of our culture.

The second name that I would mention would be Descartes, who usually gets blamed for all that goes wrong. Descartes lived at a time when the findings of the new science were causing a great deal of discomfort, things were not what they seemed. We had always thought that the sun rose in the east and went down in the west, but it doesn't. It is the earth that is moving, but the earth seems to be quite firm under our feet so things are not what they seem. And Jupiter has four moons which Aristotle would not have allowed. The world is really a very confusing place. How do you find certainty? How can you find a basis for certain knowledge? And, as we all know, Descartes claimed to have found that basis in his own existence as a thinking being, even when I

am doubting the very fact that I doubt means that I exist, and therefore, there is a firm basis. "I think therefore I am" – Cogito ergo sum. And from that, Descartes believed that one could go on to the existence of God, to the existence of the whole world of extended things in space, and to the whole structure of knowledge on the basis of clear and distinct ideas and of reasoning which had the clarity and certitude of mathematics. So that in the eighteenth century if you wanted to praise a thinker you would say he has the geometric spirit. He has that clear, certain, indubitable, no fuzzy edges, mathematical spirit. Here was a claim to have found a basis on which we could build certain knowledge. And therefore, what falls outside of that is doubtful. And so again you have a further reinforcement to this split in our culture between a world of certain facts which can be demonstrated about which there is no doubt, so you don't say "I believe", or even "We know", you just say "This is the case." And, on the other hand, what falls outside of that is uncertain, a matter of belief.

And so we come to John Locke, with his definition of belief as that which we fall back upon when knowledge is not available. I was in one of the groups that Bishop Hugh is conducting for this programme, which was about education and one of the members of the group said that in our culture we do not say "I think, therefore I am" we say "I shop therefore I am" because for us the thing that defines our being is the sovereign freedom which we have to choose whatever we want in a world which is more and more one vast supermarket available to satisfy whatever purposes we may have. The chap sitting next to me said under his breath "Tesco ergo sum".

So we have the two cultures, the split right down the middle. On the one hand the public world of facts, the plausibility structure within which we all live and on the other hand the things which are private personal opinion, that it is improper and unprofessional to inject into the public world. And of course the Christian faith belongs to that second part. And here all claims to know the truth are regarded as improper. There is a kind of logical conclusion to Bacons slogan that knowledge is power. We reach the point where any claim to know anything is treated as simply a concealed assertion of power, and that to assert something as the truth becomes unacceptable. It is true for me; it may not be true for you. Knowledge is power in another sense, and we have to unmask statements of truth as being, in fact, concealed claims to dominance, to power. And because there are no given ends, there are no given purposes for which human life exists and for which all of nature exists, we are finally alone in a world where we have a total sovereignty but are alone with no guide marks, with no land marks. And so language ceases to refer to anything beyond itself because there is in fact nothing beyond the self. We are left in a world of nihilism and ultimately of despair. When the antecedents of this programme were a series of meetings organized by the British Council of Churches in the very early 1980's looking at 1984 and asking the question "is 1984 coming upon us"? We all failed to notice that Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World' had already arrived – that we were in a world where the main business now is to entertain ourselves because there is nothing which is intrinsically worth doing.

Now how do we approach, (I am perhaps being a bit too slapdash but not, I think, wholly wrong,) how do we approach this divide in our culture with the Good News of God of his redemption in Jesus Christ? We cannot accept the position that it is one among a possible set of values. That it is a good cause which people may be asked to support. How do we affirm it as truth in the public sphere? I want to make four comments on that. First of all if we go back to Descartes, it seems clear that, in fact, he was not in an indubitable position at all. His position assumed something which is certainly dubitable, namely, that the cosmos is so constructed that certitude about it is available, apart from any reference to its creator. Now that is an enormous assumption which we have to question. If the cosmos, as we believe, is the creation of the triune God whose life is a shared communion of love given and received, the glory of the divine being, and that God chose out of the abundance of his love to create a world and to create human beings, who could be enabled to share in that glory, then it is in principle, not merely implausible, but absurd to suggest that we can find a basis of certitude by turning our backs on that reality and seeking to establish a total independence of it, (a sort of platform from which we could then make our own judgements about God and his revelation). That is the crucial false step, I am more and

more sure. The false idea that there is or there should be available to us a certitude which does not depend upon faith which does not involve any personal commitment to the grace of God.

I find, as I am sure you must find over and over again, when I try to share my faith with a friend, the answer comes back, – "Can you prove it?" Now what lies behind that question? Of course what lies behind it is the illusion that there could be something more reliable than God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. More certain, more trustworthy, on the basis of which you could then turn round and say "Well yes I approve of that". And of course if you were to find such a certitude, you would then have the same question - "How do you know that?" And you would of course then be involved in an infinite regress. But this illusion (and, of course, it permeates the whole field of the inter-faith discussion) that there can be some kind of stand point from which one could survey all the faiths of the world, is an illusion. And I will come back later to the point that it is based on a fundamental failure of responsibility, to realise the kind of world that we actually live in.

The second point. This faux pas of Descartes has led into a false ideal of objectivity - the idea that there is available to us a body of knowledge which in no sense depends upon our faith, our understanding, our commitment. This is the issue which the scientist Michael Polanyi is wrestling with in all his writings - the illusion of a kind of objectivity which removes the human subject; the idea that there can be a body of knowledge which is, as it were, cut loose from the actual human beings who claim to know it. Now of course, the moment you say that you realise that it is absurd. All knowing is subjective in the sense that it is the knowing of a human subject who is therefore, fallible, whose knowledge is always incomplete, who is always (at the best) on the way towards knowing. All human knowing is a skill in which we have to engage all our powers of intelligence, of intuition, of imagination, of courage (courage to take risks in being wrong) judgement, pertinacity and so forth. All of our knowledge is, in that sense, personal and all of it depends upon a vast reservoir of what Polanyi calls tacit knowledge, - the immense background of knowledge that we have, that has become part of our being from our earliest infancy onwards when we first learn to distinguish sights and sounds. And the larger area which is the whole of our culture, the language through which we try to grasp things. The concepts with which we extend our grasp into the world and the whole apparatus of the cultural and scientific tradition, within which we seek to probe reality and to learn what is true. All of that is the necessary background of human knowledge and it is, of course, profoundly subjective. It is human beings who are involved, and all of it begins (and this is a point that Polanyi makes very strongly) not with skepticism or doubt as Descartes does, that is a secondary part of the business. The primary part is opening one's mind to reality, opening one's mind to the tradition. One cannot begin to learn without faith, faith in the evidence of our senses, faith in the teaching of our parents, faith in the tradition that is embodied in the text books that we study at school and the teachers and so on. All of that is the foundation from which we begin to learn. And so Polanyi says, "So far from faith being a second rate substitute for knowledge it is as Augustine says the foundation of knowledge. *Credo ut intelligam*. I believe in order to understand, and there is no way of understanding without belief." But secondly, knowledge, if it is true knowledge, is personal but it is not just subjective. It is a reaching for and an always impartial, and always imperfect grasping of a reality beyond the self. And we affirm our faith that that is so by publishing what we believe to be the truth and testing it in every situation. That is what redeems our knowing from being merely subjective and that is why Polanyi uses the phrase "personal knowledge", it is both objective and subjective, but it is not merely either of them. It is always that for which a person takes responsibility and from this point of view one can see that both objectivism and subjectivism are failures of responsibility.

They are evasions of responsibility. And that is perhaps the deepest malaise of our society in this respect – the idea on the one hand that there is a body of so called scientific truth for which we need take no personal responsibility it is just how things are, and, on the other hand, that all the rest is merely subjectivity, is what I happen to think but it makes no claim to universal truth. True knowing is always the venture of faith of one who seeks, who explores, who struggles and

who takes personal responsibility for what he claims to know. And the test of that is (a) that you publish it and (b) that you test it. And of course that means that any claim that the Christian faith is true is invalid if it does not involve mission and if it does not involve the recognition that mission is also exegesis. That it is when we test the gospel out in new situations, when we engage in the kind of dialogue that Father Vincent was recommending to us earlier, when we test the Christian affirmation in new contexts, new cultural contexts in relation to new situations and so forth that we begin to learn more fully what it means to claim that Jesus Christ is Lord. So these are the conditions on which it is possible for us to affirm that the Christian faith is true. The first is that we proclaim it – mission – if we do not proclaim it we are not affirming it as true. And secondly that we test it, that mission is exegesis of the Gospel. It is the working out of the fullness of that which we shall know only at the end when every tongue shall confess and every knee shall bow. Till then we Christians do not yet know in full what it means that Jesus Christ is Lord. And I think that this, what I have called, evasion of responsibility is the fundamental malaise of our culture, it is a loss of nerve that we are not ready to accept the fact that all knowing is a venture, a venture of faith. If I may use a quotation that Polanyi uses as a paraphrase of something that Einstein was constantly saying, "No statement makes contact with reality unless it can be doubted" or, to put it the other way round, a statement which cannot be doubted makes no contact with reality. Only when we are prepared to take the risk that is involved in exploring do we actually make contact with reality. Descartes in his stove (*Cogito ergo sum*) was not actually in contact with reality.

Third point – go back behind Descartes to Bacon. The elimination of purpose as a category of explanation, the elimination of the idea that the ends are fundamental to our understanding of them. The rejection of that means, of course, that we eliminate the concept of revelation. Revelation cannot be part of public truth. And that eliminates the possibility of knowing what the true ends are. The purpose of a thing, the purpose of an enterprise, the purpose of anything cannot be known until it is complete. Unless the person whose purpose it is reveals it the cosmos the first alternative is not available to us.

There is no other way by which we could know the purpose for which all things exist, if there is any purpose unless, the one whose purpose it is reveals it. So that revelation is utterly fundamental to any understanding of the human situation in terms of purpose and therefore the conflict between revelation and reason is absurd because these are two quite different categories. Reason is not a source of information about what is the case, reason can work on what is given to it and it has to begin with revelation. If there is no revelation then there is no knowledge of the purpose for which things exist and then good and bad can only be personal opinions. They cannot be factual statements and that is where we are.

Now my final point – of course God has revealed his purpose in Jesus Christ, and we have knowledge of that revelation through that which is given to us in the Bible, and in the Christian tradition of interpreting and living out that revelation. But, as we know, in our present situation the problem that we have in speaking confidently about revelation is that we have fallen into the trap that our culture has set between a false objectivism and a false subjectivism.

We have on the one hand those who are labelled as fundamentalists and on the other those who are labelled as liberals. On the one side there is the view which sees all things in terms of subjectivity in which case the Bible is simply the record of a variety of religious experiences dating from many different epochs and shaped by many different cultural factors so that one can have a whale of a time pulling it all to pieces and discovering what were the subjective factors involved in each case. On the other side you have the attempt to treat the Bible as though it had that kind of objectivity which scientists falsely claim for their findings so that the attempt is made to eliminate all those elements of human subjectivity that are involved in the whole story from the very first happenings, the very first speech, the very first writings, through all the process of editing and revising and re-telling and selecting and collecting and translating, a very fallible process as we know, the Bible Society knows very well, publishing, printing, distributing, all the way from the very first Moses standing beside that bush to the Bible on my table. All those

subjective factors are eliminated but that eliminates the whole point of the Bible which is that it is a summons, a continuing summons to me, to share in this adventure of faith, in which the people of God have been called to become the witnesses of its truth. We are the victims of a false objectivism and a false subjectivism. A false objectivism that thinks that we can know the truth without personal responsibility for seeking it, publishing it, and testing it. And a false subjectivity which is content to say that it is just what I think but it may not be what you think. I think that this is where the relation of the Bible Society to our Gospel and Culture programme is so important, because I do not think that we can make an effective impact on this plausibility structure unless we are able to transcend this dichotomy of a false objectivism and a false subjectivism. And unless we are able to show that the Christian community (as the community that lives by this story of which the central threads are up there in the Bible) is the community which is credibly probing, exploring, and progressively discovering what the meaning of this life on earth is. The Bible functions, as it were, not just as a set of brute facts nor as a series of religious experiences but as a kind of language through which we can begin to understand the world that we live in. And it seems to me therefore, that without a credible, intellectually coherent statement of the sense in which the Bible is authoritative for us it will be very difficult for us to challenge the assumptions of the culture in which we live.

And the last point (which I think is important) is that we should remember that that great turn that took place in Europe through people like Bacon and Descartes and Locke would not have happened if it had not been that Christendom was tearing itself to pieces in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that therefore Europe turned in weariness to another way of understanding the world and I do not think we shall be effective in calling them back to a Christian way of understanding the world unless we can heal those divisions and make clear that we are speaking together in the name of Christ.

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