



What Kind of Britain?

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There are many signs that this is a question which is coming to the surface in the minds of many British people. In its most violent form it appears in the growing number of brutal attacks upon our fellow citizens whose background is in Asia, Africa or the Caribbean. These attacks, vicious as they are, come from a gut feeling that our idea of what it means to be British is under threat. With the huge disparity between the affluence of the 'developed' world and the poverty of much of the rest, the pressures will increase to close the doors to the rest of the world. The same question underlies the slogan 'back to basics'. Whatever our judgment on it may be, its use is symptomatic of a feeling that we have somehow lost our proper identity as a nation. The rising levels of violence are signals which cannot be ignored of a malaise deep in our society. And, from a quite different angle, we are witnessing a new questioning of the relation between the nation as a whole and the established churches of England and Scotland. Is the sovereign to be the defender not of the Christian faith but of faith in general? Is the intimate interweaving of Christian symbols and traditions with national life at every level, from the local parish to the throne and parliament, now an anachronism which should be discarded? All these are symptoms of a deep uncertainty about the kind of society we want to be. I think that there is only a limited number of possible answers to this question, and that we need to think clearly about them and to make firm decisions.

I

For probably the majority of our citizens we are, and should remain, a secular society, a society in which religious dogma has no place in public life, in which matters of public life are settled by rational argument on the basis of the facts, not by appeal to divine revelation. Officially we are still a Christian nation. In the coronation service the sovereign is given a Bible and promises to

rule in accordance with its teaching. That is the only 'written constitution' we have. Bishops sit in parliament in virtue of their office, and parliament begins the business of each day with Christian prayers. This is so because the Church is a much more ancient and universal institution than the state – either our own or any other of the European states. Even as recently as the late years of last century, when Gladstone wrote his treatise on 'The State in its Relation to the Church', it was clear to him that it is the Church which is the great, enduring institution, while the state, a relatively ephemeral institution, can only be properly understood by reference to its relationship with the Church.

Gladstone, of course, did not remain there. He was carried into the strong current of political liberalism which accepted the ideas of the 18th century enlightenment. Today these ideas of the young Gladstone seem to most British people quaint. We have accepted the theory of Max Weber that the movement which began in that 'Age of Reason' cannot be reversed, that the development of science and science-based technology, as it is applied to all areas of industry, administration and communication, must lead to the marginalisation of religion, to a 'disenchantment' of public life, to the relegation of religious beliefs and practice to the sphere of private, personal and domestic life. In what looks like a final endorsement of Max Weber's doctrine, religion is now classified in our official Abstract of Statistics among 'Leisure Activities'. It is probably safe to say that, for the majority of our citizens today, that is where religion properly belongs.

However, there now appears to be mounting evidence that the Weber thesis does not hold. We are witnessing a huge resurgence of religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world. The most obvious example is Islamic fundamentalism which is now one of the major factors in international politics as well as in the sphere of national security. Hindu fundamentalism has recently become a major factor in Indian national politics. Christian fundamentalism is a growing power in the United States and, as is well known, the 'religious right' having narrowly failed to capture the Republican party in 1992 is re-grouping in the hope of being more successful in 1996. It is safe to say that religion is now a major factor in politics, both national and international.

I think that this reality is somewhat obscured from public discussion in Britain because most of those who now shape public opinion were intellectually formed in the decade of the 1960's. That was a period in which the Weber hypothesis enjoyed a brilliant Indian summer. It was a period in which secularisation was hailed as the great engine of liberation. During the agony of the struggle with fascism, T S Eliot had written 'The Idea of the Christian Society'. The 1960's swept this idea aside. In a series of books such as Harvey Cox's 'The Secular City', Van Burgen's 'The Secular Meaning of the Gospel' and – above all – John Robinson's 'Honest to God', we were persuaded that belief in God as this had been understood in the Christian tradition, is no longer possible for: modern secular people. For those whose minds were shaped in this era, the rise of religious fundamentalism can only be seen as an inexplicable eruption of blind irrationality, to be explained as a kind... of psychic disorder. I understand, for example, that the Iranian revolution which brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power, was hardly reported in the official press of the USSR. When a visiting Christian asked a Soviet official why this was so, the answer was that the event was simply inexplicable.

The examples of Iran and the United States point to the fact that it is precisely in those nations where secularisation, or 'modernisation' has been most vigorously pursued that religious fundamentalism has exploded. It would seem that the human spirit cannot for ever survive in an atmosphere from which religion has been banished. Perhaps one obvious point may illuminate this. If divine revelation is excluded from the area of public truth, it follows that any belief about the purpose of human existence must be strictly a matter of private opinion. Purpose is a personal category. While a purpose is not yet realised it exists in the mind of the person whose purpose it is. When it has been fully realised, the result is available for empirical observation and rational argument. While it is still only a purpose in the mind of the agent, it can only be known if the agent chooses to disclose it, and such a disclosure must be either believed or disbelieved. In other words, there is no way of knowing the purpose except by faith: And if such knowledge is not a

matter of public truth, it follows that judgments about right and wrong cannot be matters of public truth. If the purpose for which human life exists is unknown, there are no grounds for judging whether any particular human behaviour is good or bad. The questions 'good' or 'bad' cannot be answered if the purpose for which the thing in question is unknown: it may be good for one purpose but bad for another. In a society which excludes claims for divine revelation from public truth (eg from public education) questions of right and wrong can only be matters for personal opinion. They are, exactly, 'values', not 'facts'.

A purely secular society thus becomes one in which there are no publicly accepted norms except those which survive from an earlier age of faith – such as, for example, the Ten Commandments. The result is well known: anomie, mindless violence, the hectic pursuit of instant gratification, and the loss of all belief in a reality beyond the self. The end result is a narcissism in: which 'God' is only a product of the human mind. Into this ideological vacuum, religious fundamentalism has an easy entrance, it can, as we know, take very ugly forms. The recently emerging Hindu fundamentalism has distinctly fascist overtones. So do some elements of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. It creates interesting ironies such as, for example, when the 'religious right' in the USA demands the death penalty for adultery on the grounds that certain biblical texts call for it, but are silent about the biblical prohibition of usury - a prohibition which, if endorsed, would destroy the entire system of capitalist economics from which the 'religious right' derives its considerable financial power.

But, whether we look at the global scene or at our own British society, incomparably the most important movement which we have to consider is the modern Islamic movement. Muslims in Britain are clear-eyed about the deep corruption in British society. They are deeply troubled about the future of their children, exposed at every point to a pagan world which effectively denies the reality of God, loosens all controls on personal behaviour, and is given over to boundless self-indulgence. The document issued a decade ago by the Islamic Foundation, entitled 'The Islamic Movement and the West' sets out clearly the Muslim agenda for remedying this situation. It is that Britain should become part of the world wide **umma**, an Islamic society. Anyone who cares to keep in touch with the activities of the various Islamic organisations in Britain, including those with activities against the Jewish community in Britain, will have no doubt about the vigour and seriousness of the Muslim agenda or about the power which it deploys.

II

Islam, like Christianity, is concerned with the kingdom of God, with the sovereignty of God in human affairs. In seeking to serve and extend this sovereignty, Islam draws no line between church and state, between religion and politics. Islam was born in the shadow of the Byzantine Empire which it was to destroy. In many respects we must, recognise in Islam the mirror image of a concept of 'Christendom' which identified the rule of Christ through the Gospel with the rule of a supreme Christian emperor. From its earliest beginning Islam has sought for an earthly rule of God in which the truth of God as revealed to the Prophet would be embodied in, and enforced by, supreme political power. As a recent article in a Muslim paper put it, in a passionate appeal to Muslim' parents to guard their children from the pollution of British (kufr) society: "We must understand the destiny of our children throughout the world is bound with the fate of the work to establish the Khilafa (i.e. the Islamic State)". Those who live in the areas of our cities where Muslims are present in numbers will, perhaps, have noticed the posters fastened to the lamp posts calling for support for this programme.

The evidence from many parts of the world, as it seems to me, shows that a secular society does not have the moral and spiritual resources to meet this challenge. Muslims, I find, are confident in their belief that Britain is a spiritual and moral vacuum waiting to be filled by the positive message of Islam, perhaps more accurately, a pagan society ripe for conversion. I admire the dedication of these fellow-citizens of ours. I believe that much of what they are saying about our society is true. I regret that our churches have, for the most part, lacked the insight and the

courage to recognise and unmask the paganism which has so largely captured our society. I do not believe that a secular society has the spiritual resources to meet the challenge of Islam. But I do not wish my grandchildren to live in an Islamic state under the totalitarian rule of the Sharia. I am forced to ask again the question asked by T S Eliot fifty years ago: can we adumbrate a vision of a Christian society and work with confidence towards it?

III

Perhaps the first step towards an answer must be a step back in penitence. The' Bosnian Muslims, who are so much in our thoughts just now, were originally Christians. They embraced Islam to escape: the oppression of Byzantium. We have to recognise that both Eastern and Western Christendom have been guilty of seeking for the Church a kind of power which belongs properly to the state. The New Testament should have been sufficient to guard us against: this error. On the one hand the New Testament teaches us that the civil power has a God-given authority for the limited purpose of sustaining righteousness and punishing wickedness and thus maintaining justice. The Church has the right and duty to remind the governing authorities of the origin and the terms of this mandate. But the ultimate manifestation of the righteousness and wisdom of God is, paradoxically, in the crucified Lord. This is what Islam does and must vehemently reject. The Cross of Calvary is, on the one hand, the all embracing judgment of God upon a world which is in rebellion against His truth and grace. It is the evidence that the world as a whole is at enmity with God and that there can be no identification of any worldly power with the righteousness of God. But the resurrection of the crucified Lord is the declaration (entrusted to a chosen company of those who have been prepared for it) that nevertheless the righteousness of God is indeed the supreme reality to which death itself is subject. In other words, the final identification of the ultimate righteousness with ultimate power is a reality which lies beyond history, but reality which has nevertheless to be embodied and proclaimed within history by a company of people whose life is marked by the signs of the cross – by the scars that come from not being conformed to this world.

Islam, on the other hand, which has from the beginning denied as inconceivable the possibility that God should suffer defeat and humiliation, has from the beginning been committed to the view that the rule of God must be embodied in a political form, in the form of a single world-rule using the power of the sword where necessary to enforce conformity to God's will. From a Muslim point of view, the establishment of this world-wide order of divine righteousness is no Utopian dream: the call to struggle for the realisation of the – Khilafa, the Islamic State, is being made with growing confidence among the Muslim communities in Britain.'

During most of this century we have been familiar with a similar call coming from the Marxists, with their vision of a world-wide revolution to overthrow the oppressors of the toiling masses and to establish the classless society. As a serious contender for world power this has now collapsed. Behind that was the vision of the Enlightenment, the vision of a world ruled by a universal reason accessible to all human beings of whatever race or creed and made available through universal education. That was the vision which inspired` the vast expansion of European science, technology, education and military power during the 19th century. The confidence that fuelled that expansion has now collapsed. The great religions of Asia – Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism – have no such dreams of world power. Such dreams would be a contradiction of their intrinsic nature. At this point in history Islam is the only community which claims to create, and in Iran, Saudi' Arabia and Pakistan is seeking to create, a society based on the will of Allah. And the Christian churches of the old Christendoms have – it seems – almost lost confidence even in the truth` of their own gospel and are eager rather to avoid any serious challenge either to the secular ideology of 'modernity' or to the other world religions. In this country we have even reached the point where a substantial number of priests of the established' Church think it proper to continue in their posts while -accepting and preaching Feuerbach's opinion that 'God' is only a projection of the human mind upon the empty heavens. What is to be done?

IV

We are in a confessional situation – that is to say a situation where we are required personally to state our beliefs and to stand by them in the public arena. I believe that the Gospel is truth, and therefore that it is public truth, and therefore that it must determine the kind of society which we seek to nurture. I think it has' become clear that the secular society does not have the intellectual and spiritual resources to deal with religious fundamentalism and – in particular – with Islamic fundamentalism. We have to ask what would be involved in committing ourselves to the vision of a Christian society for Britain.

To put the negative point again, I do not mean a society in which the power of the State is used to suppress other beliefs or to coerce belief. This is not merely because such coercion would be impossible but because it would be in contradiction with the central truth of the Gospel itself. A Christian society would give freedom to other beliefs not because of any indifference to the truth of the` Gospel but because the truth of the Gospel requires that' there` should be such freedom. And this, to repeat the point, is because there stands at the heart of the Gospel the fact (which Islam must, necessarily deny) that in Christ God suffered the ultimate humiliation and shame, the defeat of the truth by the lie. But a free society is vulnerable to those who use freedom to destroy freedom, and a line has to be drawn between freedom to worship and freedom to assault Britain's finely balanced social and political order in the name of religion.

Positively, we must ask what would be involved in the struggle for a Christian society. I suggest five areas for action:

1. Accountability of Christian Teaching and Preaching.

We must call for the abandonment of the futile and self-destructive attempt to domesticate the Gospel within the collapsing ideology of 'modernity'. For this there is needed the intellectual effort to recover a coherent doctrine of the authority of Scripture, one which neither imposes on Scripture a concept of authority derived from the Enlightenment (the Bible as a body of indubitable factual statements, nor treats Scripture merely as an interesting collection of ancient documents illustrative of the history of human religions. The Church has in the ecumenical creeds of the first centuries a sufficient adumbration of her message: I think we have a right to know whether the clergyman who recites them in public worship believes in them or not.

2. Christians in Public Life.

A Christian society would be one in which there was a sufficient number of Christians active in public life to shape the day-to-day discussions which lead to policy decisions. In a society which is both religiously plural and politically democratic, it is obvious that Christians will not always succeed in convincing others. But they should have the confidence to bring their Christian faith openly and unapologetically into the public debate.

3. A Range of New Christian Agencies.

Since this debate is one that is continually going on not only in the area of national or local politics but in every area of the professional, industrial, commercial and cultural worlds, there is need for an enormous development of agencies through which Christians in these several areas of public life may think through the hard decisions which are having to be made from day to day. There are already many groups of Christians trying to do this. They need to be multiplied and strengthened.

4. Understanding Islam.

There is need for a much greater understanding of Islam among the-British' public, and for a greater awareness than is now common of the long relations between Islam and Christendom from the seventh century to the present time.

5. The Content of Public Education.

There is one particular area which is of special importance, namely the area of public education. The schools are the places in which children's beliefs about the world and society are shaped. For a long time there has been the illusion that a secular education provided a neutral background of 'facts' which everyone must know, while 'religious education' was about different opinions held by different groups. There is a touching naivety about this programme, as though this secular education was not itself a process of indoctrination into a very particular set of opinions. It is this naive view which Muslims quite clearly perceive and reject. No-one can doubt the extreme difficulty which this raises for any planning of policy, in the field of public education. And, as we know, Muslims are vigorously using the new powers they have to influence schools, governors and parents, to secure for their beliefs a more influential place in public education. If we are committed to the idea of a Christian society, this is the area where the most urgent work needs to be done.

Two final words are needed about the spirit in which we approach this task. I spoke of a movement of penitence when we remember the sins committed in the name of 'Christendom'. Penitence does not, however, mean paralysis. There is among liberal Christians a vast amount of unshriven guilt about – for example – the crusades. (There is, of course, a very different feeling among Muslims about the° amazing achievement of their armies in destroying in a few short decades the great Christian civilisation of East Asia and North Africa). Guilt without forgiveness has no creative power; it paralyses. At the heart of the story we tell is the figure of Peter who denied his Lord, was forgiven and re-commissioned and was – in a few days – the confident preacher of the cross and resurrection. We have no right to allow guilt for the sins of the past to lead us into a fresh betrayal of the trust we have been given by failing to preach the Gospel as public truth.

But this confidence would be unworthy of the Gospel itself if it was not inspired and sustained by the love of God which, as St Paul says, is shed abroad in our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our response to the very confident and vigorous world of Muslim organisations to win followers (especially in the Universities) for the Prophet must be met by a loving and sensitive-effort to communicate to Muslims the truth which they so vehemently-deny, namely that God has given us his beloved Son to be the Saviour of the world. Where are the places where Christians are being prepared to do this?

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