

# Faith and Reason

Reflections on the address by Pope Benedict XVI  
in Westminster Hall on 17th September 2010.

## Introduction: What is the relationship between faith and reason?

Pope Benedict's speech in Westminster Hall to political leaders during his State Visit in September 2010 was widely praised and rightly so. Yet some months have passed and his particular message seems to have been forgotten, if not by the Bishops then by many of the rest of us. This is a great pity as his words are of vital importance to Catholics and indeed all religious believers when assessing what our reaction should be when questions of the relationship between the law and politics on the one hand and religious beliefs on the other arise – and we need to remember that this is happening more and more often. Let us recall his words and then apply them to the current situation in the UK.

He said that: 'The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles'

Thus it is fundamentally wrong to say that faith belongs to the spiritual world and reason to the secular one. Instead the crux is that faith is not an alternative to reason but is the pre-condition of reason and this relationship is one of the central themes of the Holy Father's teaching.<sup>1</sup> As Pope Benedict himself puts it: 'God is Logos – meaning, reason and word... Faith in the God who is Logos is at the same time faith in the creative power of reason'.<sup>2</sup> In a pithy phrase, St. Anselm expressed reason as 'faith seeking understanding'<sup>3</sup> and the First Vatican Council in *Dei Filius* put it thus: 'Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason.. 4

## Religion a Private Matter?

We increasingly hear the view that religious beliefs are private matters only and that we have as Christians no right to make our voice heard. For example, when the Catholic Bishops opposed the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill Baroness Warnock said in the *New Statesman* that Roman Catholic MPs would 'have no business' opposing the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill on the basis of their faith. They should not oppose it 'unless they could find other reasons than their own religious convictions on which to base their opposition'. Nor is she alone. Janet Daley, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 11th February 2008 said 'In the contest between the principles of modern democracy and doctrines of faith, democracy and the rule of secular law must always win'.<sup>5</sup> Thus we should quietly go to Church and keep our opinions to ourselves.

Moreover Baroness Warnock has recently published a book on the theme that religion has no particular right to be heard in issues of morals and legislation: *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion out of Politics*<sup>6</sup> in which she puts the question; 'Is religion as necessary to society as morality and the law are necessary?' Her answer is 'No. Religion is optional. Morality and the law are not'<sup>7</sup>. She goes further and makes the extraordinary, to me at least, claim, that: 'it is of the greatest importance to separate the idea of religion from that of morality'. One can only add that if indeed religion has nothing to do with morality then it is time that we all closed down, starting with this journal and ending, I suppose, with the Vatican. 8

Here is another example. At present (April 2011) a proposal to ordain women as bishops in the Church of England is with the Anglican dioceses in the form of a draft Measure. In what is presumably an attempt to influence the decision a group of senior MPs from across the political parties including Frank Field, David Blunkett, Peter Bottomley and Simon Hughes have put forward an Early Day Motion calling on the Government 'to remove any exemptions pertaining to gender under existing Equality legislation, in the event that the Measure has overwhelming support in the Dioceses but fails through a technicality to receive final approval in General Synod'<sup>9</sup>. In simple language if the Church of England does not decide to ordain women bishops then Parliament will force it to do so. If this is not militant intolerant secularism then what is? And if this attempt against the Church of England succeeds we know who will be next. We must be prepared for a court case brought by a woman wishing to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest and who alleges sex discrimination and who claims heavy damages.

There are future challenges too. The *Sunday Telegraph* reported on 13th February 2011 that there are proposals to allow same - sex marriages as an alternative to the existing civil partnerships and that heterosexual couples may be allowed to enter into civil partnerships rather than marriage.

### **Religion and the Claims of Democracy**

One argument that we must be prepared to meet head on is that the claims of religious groups must always give way to those of a democracy. This is simply not true. Let us not forget that Hitler and his Nazis came to power in Germany on 6th November 1932 by winning the largest share of the popular vote, (33%) and consolidated this in the last election held until after the end of the war when on 5th March 1933 they won 43%. Not a majority to be sure but enough to govern.<sup>10</sup> Nor would Thucydides have been impressed by the argument that democracy should always win. He recounts the well-known episode when the Athenian assembly, composed of all the male citizens, decided in 427 BC to slaughter all of the adult male population of Mitylene, which had revolted, and to reduce the women and children to slavery.<sup>11</sup> They did indeed change their minds, and the decree was never executed, but the fact was that they had made it.

### **Why we need to meet the challenge.**

It is clear that there is now a strong prejudice against relying on religious faith when arguing for changes in the law or opposing changes in the law and that this prejudice is being expressed in an intolerant way. The question is how we as Christians should meet these challenges. The Holy Father has told us how. The key is the word 'reason'. We must meet these challenges by the application of our reason based on our faith.

What we cannot do is simply shout and say: 'We are Catholics. We know that what you are doing is wrong and the reason why we know this is that we are Catholics. So you must stop'. This is simply meeting the intolerance of some (but not all) secularists<sup>12</sup> with intolerance of our own and is precisely what the Holy Father warned against when he spoke of the 'distortions of religion' which, he said, 'arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion'. This leads, he said, to sectarianism and fundamentalism<sup>13</sup>.

This failure to bolster our arguments coming from our faith with reason is precisely what our opponents accuse us of and, it must be admitted, with good reason in some cases.

In 1985 Mr. (now Lord) Dale Campbell-Savours MP said this in the debate on the Unborn Children (Protection) Bill introduced by Mr. Enoch Powell and which was intended to prohibit experiments on human embryos: 'A Christian need do no more than pronounce his article of faith...For those of us who subscribe to such views, they may be sufficient justification for supporting this Bill. But I do not believe that that approach, without the intellectual base that requires deliberation and evaluation of its merits, is sufficient to convince this House'.<sup>14</sup> Nor is this attitude confined to Parliament. Lucy Vickers, Professor of Law at Oxford Brookes University, points out that the Christian view that 'God has created all men in his image ...gives no basis for non-Christians to respect human rights'<sup>15</sup>.

It would be tempting, but quite wrong, to take the usual line of some Catholics and blame the bishops. In fact many of their pronouncements have been couched in language calculated to influence believers and non believers alike. As an example, take this quotation from 'Cherishing Life' (2004)<sup>16</sup> published by the Catholic Bishops Conference: 'In our society, there are many ways in which human life is cherished and widespread concern for protection of children from harm.' Another example, taken from a lay organisation, the Catholic Union, writes in support of the family but supports its argument by saying that: 'Without the family society and government face an impossible task in replacing it. The breakdown of the family is already costing the nation such a vast sum in resources that the Exchequer can no longer sustain the burden'.<sup>17</sup>

This is precisely the type of argument which we need in order to argue our case in what is often called 'the public square'. Why, then, are we still accused of basing our arguments purely on the tenets of our religion and thus often denied a hearing? One reason is of course that it suits militant secularists to brand us as intolerant fundamentalists. Another is, though, that even in the recent past we as Catholics have not been at the forefront of those arguing for a change in the law in the interests of disadvantaged groups. For example, although discrimination in employment on the grounds of sex was outlawed in 1975 and on the grounds of race in 1976, it was not until 1995 that discrimination on the grounds of disability was likewise outlawed.<sup>18</sup> Until that time, and it is only 16 years ago, it was quite lawful to refuse a job to someone who was disabled, even though they satisfied all the criteria for the post, purely on the ground that they were disabled. There were doubtless many Christians who campaigned against this injustice but where were we as a body? We were nowhere.

### **How we need to meet the challenge.**

We must be prepared to argue our case based on reason coming from our faith and I suggest that our starting point must be that arresting exchange between Jesus and Pilate recorded by St. John<sup>19</sup> culminating in the words of Jesus to Pilate: 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.'. Here then we have the great affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus over the whole of creation in which, as Jesus puts it earlier in this dialogue, he 'comes to bear witness to the truth'. Thus, as Tom Wright expresses it<sup>20</sup> this 'does not mean

that Jesus' kingdom is a mere spiritual one, a gnostic dream of escape that has nothing to do with the present world ... Jesus' kingdom does not *derive from* the world, but it is *designed for* the world'.<sup>21</sup> It is, he says: 'the kingdom of the wise Creator God who longs to heal the world'.

In this search for truth how then shall we proceed on the practical level of meeting the challenges posed by Government, law and society based on our reason from our faith?

A starting point must of course be to emphasise our abiding belief that each human life, as being made in the image of God, must be cherished. Too often, I suggest, this has been expressed in a purely negative way in our opposition to abortion and euthanasia. We must of course be unflinching in our opposition to these but at the same time we must be prepared to stress our commitment to cherishing human life in all its fullness. In this context it is worth noting the views of Nicholas Sagovsky who in *Christian Tradition and the Pursuit of Justice*<sup>22</sup> argues for a Christian commitment to liberty not on the basis of maximisation of freedom, which can lead to mere selfishness, but to the maximisation of potential. This can be a powerful tool for arguing, for example, for a continued commitment to life long learning for us all and especially to enable those, who have missed opportunities in earlier life, to achieve them later.

And when we do argue against the great evil of abortion let us also condemn the exercise of the death penalty as it is really impossible to be against one and not the other.<sup>23</sup> I have personally never understood why opposition to abortion tends to be a right-wing issue and that to the death penalty a left-wing one and support for abortion tends to be left-wing and for the death penalty right-wing. For Christians it is surely the same seamless issue.

At the same time our reason tells us that a cult based on individual needs leads in the end to the destruction of all that is good in society. This is precisely because of our belief as Christians in Original Sin and that as a consequence if we are left to own devices there are the temptations to satisfy our individual wants at the expense of others. Thus as Christians we must look to the Common Good and in particular at the needs of those least able to fend for themselves. At the same time we need a belief in the power of Government. This is a very old theme in Christian thought as witness the First Letter of Peter<sup>24</sup>: 'For the sake of the Lord, accept the authority of every social institution: the emperor, as the supreme authority, and the governors as commissioned by him to punish criminals and praise good citizenship'. Yet what is not being commended is a slavish adherence to authority: note how bad rulers are called to account such as Herod and Nebuchadnezzar. I suspect that we are in an era where there will be a growing tendency to rely on individualism and, if so, the Christian belief in the power of Governments to do good but also our right to call them to account may well be one of our most important insights.

If we as Christians are to play a part in public debate, as I have argued that we must, then we must not be shy of showing the extent to which Christians contribute so much to civil society. Nick Spencer of the think tank Theos in *'Doing God, A Future for Faith in the Public Square'*<sup>25</sup> refers to a study carried out in the East of England<sup>26</sup> that showed an enormous range of activities carried out by worshipping groups. These were not only the obvious (but valuable) ones of visiting the sick but IT training and environmental groups. He also refers to a report *'Faith in England's Northwest'*<sup>27</sup> which surveyed more than 2,300 faith communities encompassing nine religions, and which identified more than 5,000 significant 'non-worship' projects over 45,000 volunteers. This is not of course to say that those who are not members of religious groups do not also make a contribution to civil society. What it does say is that Christians make a *positive* contribution and that as Christians we are deeply involved in God's world. What we do not do, as some secularists seem to believe, is simply sit on the sidelines and criticise.

At the same time we must uphold the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion as enshrined in article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. There seems to be a growing tendency on the part of the courts to think in terms of a hierarchy of rights where the right not to be discriminated on the ground of sexual orientation takes precedence over that of freedom of religion. This has led to unfortunate cases such as that of the guesthouse owners Peter and Hazel Bull who were successfully sued by two civil partners on the grounds that their policy of only allowing only heterosexual married couples to stay in their double rooms discriminated against them under the Equality Act 2010. Here a policy of constructive but firm engagement is needed. Under the Equality Act it is lawful to discriminate on the grounds of sex where an employee is expected to live in a private home and we must press for this principle to be applied to guest houses which are in effect also private homes and where the owners have a religious or conscientious objection to allowing same sex couples to occupy the same room.

## **Conclusion**

Just as this article was being finalised the present Archbishop of Westminster spoke on the radio<sup>28</sup> and was asked about recent situations where the Catholic Church had lost battles with the State and in particular where Catholic Adoption Agencies had been forced to close as they would not be willing to accept homosexual couples

as prospective adopters. His reply was simply that in future we must use 'better arguments'. It has been the purpose of this article to suggest how those 'better arguments' might be developed in the light of our faith based on reason. We must not be ashamed of our beliefs and we do have the right to argue for them on the basis of our faith. Equally we must recognise that we do not have the right to impose our views on the rest of society.

In his Westminster Hall speech the Holy Father referred to St. Thomas More whose trial took place in that very building. In one of his letters from prison in 1534 to his daughter Margaret<sup>29</sup> he spoke of his trust in 'reason with the help of faith'. He was to fight – and win - his battle with an intolerant state in the shape of Henry VIII. We are facing a similar battle today and we would do well to make More's words our own.

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#### Footnotes

1 The second part of his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* discusses this point. See paragraphs 28 and 29.

2 'Auf der Suche nach dem Frieden', an address given on the sixtieth anniversary of the landings of the Allies in France, June 6th 2004, and published as Chapter 6 'Searching for Peace, Tensions and Dangers' in *Values in a Time of Upheaval* Ignatius Press San Francisco 2006. This whole collection of essays by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) is strongly recommended to anyone interested in the theme of this article. .

3 St. Anselm, *Prosl. proem*: PL 153. 225 quoted in Catechism of the Catholic Church para. 158.

4 *Die Filius* 4: DS 3017.

5 These and other relevant quotations are collected by Jonathan Chaplin in 'The Place of Religious Arguments for Law Reform in a 'Secular State' (2009) 162 *Law and Justice* 18.

6 Continuum London 2010

7 *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion out of Politics* ibid. page 159.

8 I suspect that what she means is 'secular morality' but that is not what she says.

9 See <http://www.frankfield.co.uk/media/press-releases/q/date/2011/01/30/mps-declare-their-hand-on-women-bishops/> accessed April 4th 2011.

10 *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Third Reich*, Richard Overy, Penguin London 1996 at pages 21-22.

11 The story is told in Thucydides *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. My account is taken from the edition by Richard Livingstone OUP 1943 Bk.3 Ch.36

12 There is an argument, which there is not time to develop here, that in the context of which I am speaking we are ourselves Christian secularists.

13 Pope Benedict's point that failure to appreciate that faith and reason are inextricably linked leads, as he says, to a narrow form of religion. This is where an emotional faith is not underpinned by any intellectual formation and leads as he says to fundamentalism. It hardly needs saying that a fundamentalist Christianity gives ammunition to our opponents among the secularists.

14 Quoted in *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion out of Politics* op.cit. page 25.

15 In *Religious Freedom, Religious Discrimination and the Workplace* Hart Publishing, Portland, Oregon and Oxford 2008 at page 32.

16 Catholic Truth Society London. The quotation is on page 5.

17 *Restoring Faith in Politics* Catholic Union 2010.

18 The initial legislation was the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 but the relevant law is now in the Equality Act 2010.

19 18: 33-40; 19 1-16.

20 In 'Government and the New Testament' an essay in *God and Government* SPCK London 2009

21 Author's italics.

22 SPCK London 2008

23 Mr. (now Lord) Norman St. John Stevas MP put this well in the debate on the Abortion Bill in 1967 when he remarked that the House of Commons had recently voted for the abolition of the death penalty (in 1965) yet was now voting to legalise abortion. I owe this reference to *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion out of Politics* op.cit. page 19.

24 2:13-17

25 Theos London 2006. This is only one of a number of excellent publications from Theos on this area. a visit to their website is warmly recommended : [www.theosthinktank.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.uk)

26 *Faith in the East of England* East of England's Faiths' Council and Cambridge University 2005

27 North West Development Agency 2003

28 Andrew Marr Show April 4th 2011

29 Collected in *The Last Letters of Thomas More* edited Alvaro de Silva Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids Michigan and Cambridge UK 2000. This letter is at page 99.

30 The author would like to express his enduring gratitude to the retiring Editor, Robert Williams, for his encouragement in the process of writing this piece, for his most helpful suggestions, and for his personal kindness over very many years.