

## Towards a National Spirituality Strategy

**The full text of the 2010 London Newman Lecture given by Professor Peter Hennessy FBA, Litt D, Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History, Queen Mary, University of London – given at St. Alban's Centre, Holborn, London.**

It is a real pleasure and a great honour to be invited to deliver the 2010 Newman Lecture. This evening I shall draw on three texts, one of which – the third – may surprise you: The Sermon on the Mount; The Rule of St Benedict and George Orwell's 1946 essay on 'Politics and the English Language'<sup>1</sup>. Why the incomparable George? Because were he alive today, I have a suspicion he would have noticed over the past twenty years (he died in January 1950) a strange paradox. And it's this. As society has become more secular, on at least the measure of church or chapel attendance, the language of religion has more and more suffused the vocabulary of politics, business and education.

None of us nowadays can escape the duty of coining a 'mission statement'. No self-regarding politician dare fail to offer those whom he or she seeks to influence or deceive a 'vision'. Once upon a time only mystics and those gifted with an intense spirituality had visions. Now even management consultants do. Most political ones are the usual mixture of cliché, banality and prejudice. Nevertheless, they have nicked the vocabulary of the church. This evening I want to pinch something back. And the word I want to grasp from their mouths is 'strategy'; the linguistic Siamese twin, as they deploy it, of 'vision'.

For example since 2008, Her Majesty's Government has published an annual National Security Strategy<sup>2</sup>. This of itself is interesting. We acquired a huge territorial Empire and disposed of it (a few residuals apart); we prevailed in two world wars with our allies as we did in the great 40-year east-west confrontation of the Cold War. Not once did we feel the need to write down what the great historians of Empire, Robinson and Gallagher, called 'the cold rules for national safety'<sup>3</sup>, or the ingredients required for what Douglas Hurd calls the capacity to 'punch above our weight in the world'<sup>4</sup>. Now we do as a medium-sized power tucked up inside a huge regional organisation that goes by the name of 'Europe'.

So, in the age of national security and many other Whitehall-crafted strategies, why not a national spirituality strategy for the United Kingdom? You may think it an absurd or an improper notion for the Catholic Church or the Anglicans in the UK. I happen not to.

Why? Because we may be in the midst of a rather promising opportunity. Mammon has taken a terrible pasting since what the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, has called the 'Panic of 2008'<sup>5</sup> when both money and the institutions devoted to its fructifying appeared to melt before our eyes with astounding rapidity not just here but round the globe.

Didn't that singular combination of ice and fire (the ice being the freezing of the purest of capitalism's flows – inter-bank lending – and the fire the successive lava streams it caused to flow which are very much still in motion) give those of us who subscribe to the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount school, rather than the doctrines of the Chicago school of economists as a primer for living, a chance; a possibility that the glorious resonance of the Beatitudes might get more of a hearing as the assertions of Tom Wolfe's Wall Street's and the City and Canary Wharf's 'masters of the universe' are temporarily muted?<sup>6</sup>

Let me talk a bit more about the cacophony of contemporary sounds and how best we might seek to 'distil the frenzy',<sup>7</sup> to adapt a phrase of John Maynard Keynes, before coming back to the contents of a national spirituality strategy that just might help create a little more space for God in people's consciousnesses. For we all have to compete all the time in the consciousness stakes.

Let's think for a moment about those bits of the brain to which we direct – or should direct – our attentions, the parts where that consciousness competition is played out. As a historian, my clump of target cells is the hippocampus – the strange tube-shaped bit of the brain which deals with memory. My job is to work on and add a bit to the collective memory. As for those in the spiritual professions, I was very interested last year when the American National Institute of Neurological Disorders in Bethesda, Maryland, pronounced on those clusters of the little grey cells that handle religious faith or the extraordinary contemporary array of belief-rivals. It turns out that they are the regions of the brain which developed most recently in human evolution and give us what the scientists call 'sophisticated cognition' – that is the lateral frontal lobe and frontal gyri and those areas used for handling linguistics, 'decoding metaphor and recalling images.'<sup>8</sup>

In scientific terms, those are the cognitive patches where we must compete for attention with our competitors. Though the science of the mind has only recently been able to locate this crucial terrain, exciting it, feeding it and sustaining it has been the problem for the Catholic and Anglican Churches and other Christian faiths in the UK for at least 94 years – since so much of our country's faith and, I suspect, its optimism perished with thousands upon thousands of our young men on the Somme in July 1916. It was not Mammon that struck the

first hammer-blow to faith in our twentieth-century experience; it was war. And the interwar generation both knew it and saw it in the form of falling church attendances.<sup>9</sup>

It was in the 1920s and 1930s that some of the finest tuned Christian minds began to seize upon the paradoxes of what we would now call a ‘believing without belonging’ society<sup>10</sup>. Ronald Knox was among them (he spent much of the interwar years as Catholic chaplain in Oxford<sup>11</sup>). Writing in 1930 in what strikes me as an uncanny pre-echo of today’s phenomenon of what might be labelled ‘Dawkinsry’ he noticed a rise in the degree to which religion was being talked about in public and compared it, no change there, with a concurrent public debate about economic setbacks following a period of boom as the Great Depression began to bite. This is what Knox said of the apparent reawakening of interest in religion:

‘It would be encouraging if we could regard this as a healthy sign. But is it not rather our experience that, while men are in health, their health is the last subject which preoccupies them; that it is only when symptoms of age or decay begin to set in that they air their maladies for public inspection? The same reflection applies to the body politic: in the piping times of Victorian prosperity people did not talk about trade or employment – it would have been almost vulgar: nor did people exercise their minds over the continuance of our world-hegemony; they took it for granted. It is when the public mind becomes less easy on such topics that they are freely ventilated.’

For Knox, it was ‘difficult not to conclude that a society talks about religion more freely and more publicly when religion is beginning to die out. Like the enfeebled pulse or dwindling exports, the empty pew begins, for the first time, to arrest our attention.’<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after Ronald Knox wrote that, John Maynard Keynes, talking to Virginia Woolf about the formation of their generation, spoke of a kind of Christian overhang in an increasingly secular England – ‘we destroyed Christianity and yet had its benefits,’ he said<sup>13</sup>. Though none of us here today are likely to believe that Christianity is ‘destroyed’ in our land, Keynes, I think, was partly pre-echoing what the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said in his Leicester Cathedral Lecture last year about 2009 Britain being a country ‘uncomfortably haunted by the memory of religion.’<sup>14</sup>

And it is here that I see the great early twenty-first century opportunity with Mammon reeling and Dawkins on so many lips. What we should fear most is a comfortable, supine and widespread indifference. That is not a problem. For we are living through a moment – perhaps fleeting; perhaps not – when the sounds, the sentiments and the convictions of a glorious 2000-year old tradition just might be heard, felt and appreciated in a way they have not been for quite a time. The timeliness of the timeless, as one might describe it.

If we were a public limited company or a government rather than a lecture audience gathered to honour the memory of Cardinal Newman and we were charged tonight with seizing the moment and producing a National Spiritual Strategy for the UK, what would be the chapter headings?

First, a section on nerve-keeping. This is better than an ‘I told you so’ paragraph. The nerve-keeping preamble could draw not just on Catholic Social Teaching but on the William Temple Anglican tradition too and the Christian Democratic strand in European politics. It was very noticeable, for example, that at the G20 summit in April 2009 it was the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, daughter of a Lutheran Pastor, who declared: ‘This is a historic opportunity afforded us to give capitalism a conscience, because capitalism has lost its conscience and we have to seize this opportunity.’<sup>15</sup>

This would be the place in a National Spiritual Strategy document to make allies of the many who live in the kind of spiritual overhang Keynes was describing, people, in Clement Attlee’s words when he was asked by his official biographer if he had a Christian faith, who ‘Believe in the ethics ... can’t believe in the mumbo jumbo.’<sup>16</sup> For the ‘Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren’,<sup>17</sup> to borrow the title of another Keynes essay from the Thirties, cannot be contemplated without a spiritual dimension, as I think Attlee would have understood, given the legacy of our lamentable stewardship of the land, the water and the air – not to mention leaving them, our children and grandchildren, to pay later for our consumption now thanks to the Private Finance Initiative. No other generation in the UK has ever done this to its descendants and we should hang our heads in shame.

Section Two of a National Spirituality Strategy would depend on we believers alone – not our potential allies. In today’s circumstances we must not waste a particle of nervous or physical energy on internal disputes. Differences have to be acknowledged but civil wars and faction fights within faiths repel the uncommitted as powerfully and certainly as they do in political parties. For example, for those, like me, who love the Anglican tradition from the outside, it is simply unbearable to see a great church wrecking itself on gonads.

Section Three of the National Spirituality Strategy should concentrate on the core theme. If I were an advertising man – which I am not – I would describe it as the best copy ever written anywhere in the world. I

have referred to it already. It is a mere 145 words long and it is called 'The Sermon on the Mount'. Every one of the Beatitudes resonates in today's circumstances – as they always have done. I shall return to 'The Sermon on the Mount' in a moment when I ponder the problem of my old trade before I came into the university world – the Press – and its handling of religion.

Section Four of the National Spirituality Strategy would look at multi-faith Britain. Here we Catholics have a huge competitive advantage. For there is hardly a patch of the earth that our Church has not touched at some time or another. We understood 'globalisation' in our bones millennia before the word was invented; from, in fact, the moment when the Roman Empire came over to Rome, as it were. History has dealt a good hand to the Anglicans, too, in global terms. For what was the British Empire but a huge Common Market for competing faiths? Given its territorial spread, there was not one form of belief experienced by man that Anglican missionaries did not encounter amidst palm and pine, desert, jungle or savannah. Those frontal lobes of the brain – where the gift of faith finds its cerebral expression – are not always and everywhere attuned to our traditions. They never will be. But striving for courteous co-existence and understanding is the way to proceed. As for those who put their trust in the things of this world, they are reeling and falling as we meet. It is a moment for confident but not aggressive restatement for those whose beliefs rest on older, firmer foundations while avoiding any kind of spiritual imperialism.

Section Five of the Strategy would be a kind of management audit. This is an area which rarely excites my frontal lobes, I must admit. But as my Anglican friend and research student, Mark Fox, put it to me recently speaking of his own tradition and drawing on his experience in business and politics:

'As an entity the Church of England would appear to be supremely well equipped to be a very effective group representing its own priorities. What other organisation has an office (a church) and a representative (a priest) designated to cover every square inch of the country. It has a well appointed and handsomely staffed head office in London (Church House and Lambeth Palace) with regional head offices in York and Canterbury. Twenty six of its senior executives sit as of right in the national Parliament – no worrying about elections or need for mandates. All over the country are dotted huge regional offices with staff (cathedrals and chapters) – which are much larger and more prominent than any government regional office. In addition to all of that about a million people a week go of their own free will to listen to the message and be given "lines to take" (scripture and sermon). And yet it still struggles to put its message across.'<sup>18</sup>

We Catholics cannot match the Anglicans on seats for our bishops in the House of Lords or a guaranteed place for the Archbishop of Canterbury at every state occasion but we have our spiritual infrastructure, too, in our churches and our schools. I'll come back to transmitting the message in a moment. But on the subject of organisation, I'd add a more individualised section in a National Spiritual Strategy for the second decade of the Twenty-First century. It would be – if the right monastic pen could be found – a modern version of *The Rule of St. Benedict*<sup>19</sup>. For not only is the original rule a most marvellous primer on the conduct of a spiritual life, it is also a superb guide on how to divide one's waking hours between work, prayer, learning and living with others. *The Rule of St. Benedict* carried great swathes of Europe before it for half a millennium or more. 'It would', as David Knowles wrote, 'be hard to find a more practical wisdom, always humane but never weak, pressed into such a small compass.'<sup>20</sup>

Each time I read *The Rule of St. Benedict*, I am struck more and more by both its humanity and its enduring utility as a guide to life and not just life within the walls of a monastery or convent for what one might call our Church's full-time professionals. I was struck by Caroline White's 'Introduction' to her recent translation of the Rule for the Penguin Classics series when she wrote:

'Until now those who have read Benedict's Rule and written on it, have largely been those closely associated with Benedictine monasticism, but it is time for the Rule to become more widely known beyond this community, to be more accessible to lay people and those of other faiths. The Rule is of interest, not only as a source of spiritual inspiration for our daily lives, powerfully persuasive of the importance of silence in our busy routines and humility and respect in our relations with others, but also as a key text in the history of monasticism and the Christian church.'<sup>21</sup>

The Rule, I reckon, has never been matched by any management consultancy (and think of the damage that profession has done to our language). And far from increased wealth per head leading to greater leisure and learning per head (as Keynes thought it would in that 1930 essay of his<sup>22</sup>), great and successive surges of economic output in the advanced world have left us living in scratchier, more stressed, envious and resentful societies than ever before with a coarsening of our politics to match – part of the challenge of affluence, as the Oxford economist, Avner Offer calls it<sup>23</sup>.

Here, on the subject of societies ill at ease with themselves, lurks the Press. Just think what dismissive fun sections of them would have with a National Spiritual Strategy if one were actually written. However, the matter of 'How will it play on *Newsnight* or the *Today* programme?' is the first question asked these days in Whitehall at the very earliest stage of drafting a policy – and what a hugely corrosive effect that political obsession has had on our deeply soundbitten and disbelieving civic society.

In a way, on this point, I bring naught for your comfort. Let me explain by reprising an exercise I undertook 21 years ago now on how 'The Sermon on the Mount' would have been reported by the British Press had it been delivered in 1989. This is what I wrote after praising the Sermon as a 'masterpiece' of copy not least because it's all about "do's" rather than "don'ts" and it's caveat-free. The latter fact I described as 'crucial'<sup>24</sup>. Imagine the result, for example, if a Treasury man had been in on the drafting. Verse 5 would have read something like this:

'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth, always bearing in mind the Government's overriding constraints on public expenditure and only in those special circumstances as the Secretary of State for Social Security, in consultation with the Chancellor, may, from time to time, permit.'

To make Verse 9 palatable the Ministry of Defence would have demanded a refinement or two:

'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the Children of God, providing proper verification procedures are agreed and that nothing is conceded in negotiations to prejudice the effectiveness of the British strategic nuclear force.'

If "The Sermon on the Mount" had been a Government White Paper, Christianity would never have got off the ground. Nor would it have endured if an advertising agency had slicked-it-up into a series of sound-bites designed to appeal to the upwardly mobile. (Every syllable of 'The Sermon' is, in fact, a counterblast to those on-the-make. The conspicuous consumer is nowhere among the 'Blessed'.)

'What it can tell journalists about themselves is less evident. To make that plain, a different device is required. It's this: imagine how the "story" of 'The Sermon on the Mount' would be reported in 1989', I wrote. *The Times* might do it like this:

From our Jerusalem correspondent:

'Reports reached Jerusalem last night of an up-country meeting addressed by the political activist and religious fundamentalist, Jesus. He shocked his audience, reliable sources suggested, by the stridency of his tone and the austerity of his message.'

His opening words set the theme for the whole speech. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', he said, 'For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'

It was, witnesses added, an attack entirely directed at the 'haves' rather than the 'have-nots' for whom Jesus did not have a critical word. It was received with rapture by his largely working-class followers perched precariously on the side of a mountain.

A spokesman for the Psephological Research Centre at the Jerusalem Institute of Technology commented: 'This kind of thinking will have little appeal at a general election. Far from offering mortgage or tax-relief to the hard-pressed executive and middle classes, Jesus' speech seemed to suggest they should give up everything and follow the scriptures.'

Pontius Pilate's Press Secretary said: 'That bit about blessed are the persecuted will go down particularly badly in the Centurions' Mess.' Jesus himself was unavailable for comment last night. But the only practical result of his speeches is likely to be a strengthening of the police presence in the remoter mountain regions.'

*The Independent's* line would be much the same, though a touch more sympathetic to Jesus' social policy while stressing its potentially costly implications for the level of welfare payments. And, somehow, it would have managed to get a superb picture of Jesus in full flow. *The Guardian* would run a generally favourable report, noting the extensive nature of the Palestinian 'underclass' with a 'backgrounder' on the inside page based on the notebook of a staff writer who had snatched a half-hour conversation with Jesus in a Bethlehem café during his last fact-finding visit to the West Bank.

A week or so later, *The Economist* would run a short piece dismissing the impracticality of Jesus' welfare economics and urging the Central Bank in Rome to ignore it and to press-on with its first priority of creating a tariff-free zone within the entire Roman Empire regardless of the unemployment consequences for the poorer parts of the Mediterranean littoral. It would also regret the propensity of 'left-wing' philosophers, however unblemished their personal lives, to come up with political programmes which promised only double-digit inflation in perpetuity.

Somewhat down the market, *The Mirror*, in an ‘opinion’ column, would give The Sermon a cautious welcome while pointing out that unlike Sir William Beveridge, the founding father of the British welfare state, Jesus had no background as an administrator or qualifications as a social scientist. ‘New Jerusalems are better built by Labour politicians of the old school, like Nye Bevan, Jim Griffiths or Clem Attlee, rather than long-haired prophets who know they will never have to face the responsibilities of government office.’

Deeper down the market, *The Sun* would be less restrained. Under the headline:

**LAW AND ORDER THREAT IN MID-EAST AS LOONY LEFTIE BACKS ‘PERSECUTED AND REVILED’**

it would declare that:

‘Jesus yesterday joined a long list of loony-lefties who have given socialism a bad name. What Derek Hatton did for Liverpool and Ken Livingstone for London, he wants to do for the people of Bethlehem and District. Pilate’s only answer is to follow the well-tried methods of Mrs Thatcher – abolishing the Bethlehem council and ratecapping its successor authority.’

*The Nine O’Clock News* and *News at Ten* would ignore the story altogether as no camera team had managed to reach ‘The Mount’. *Channel 4 News* would run a three minute interview with a Middle East expert from Chatham House who would, with regret, opine that nothing Jesus had said would be likely to bring negotiations any nearer on the Palestinian problem. ‘The Sermon’, in fact, could make the position of moderate Arabs and Jews even more difficult.

The Press Association would run a story reporting ‘Downing Street sources’ as saying that if Jesus applied for a visa to enter Britain in order to address a fringe meeting at the forthcoming Labour Party Conference, the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary would have to consider refusing the request on public order grounds. Asked for a comment on ‘The Sermon’, Neil Kinnock told the PA: ‘Nothing and nobody must come between Labour and defeating the Tories.’

In short, for our profession, [that is, my former trade, the Press] ‘The Sermon on the Mount’ would be business as usual, which would not, of course, prevent Jesus from eventually changing the world, even that blinkered and demented bit of it that goes by the name of the News Room.

Back to the spring of 2010. A few final thoughts. Mammon has just scored and, on the bankers’ bonuses front, is still scoring huge own-goals. This is the moment for Christians to cease doing the same. It’s possible that more than a passing moment of opportunity is ahead of us. The reaction to the Thirties’ depression made the political, economic and social weather for a very long time in this country. After World War II, this coalesced into a ‘never again’ feeling which underpinned the decencies of the postwar settlement and its expression in full-employment economics and the kind of comprehensive welfare provision William Temple had long sought. It had its problems did this postwar consensus, but it held until the late 1970s. This post-1945 ‘never again’ impulse, though more than a small part of it reflected that overhang of a Christian past, nonetheless witnessed a growing affluence which increasingly crowding-out religious observance if not religious belief.

What are the chances of a religious recovery finding this time a symbiosis with economic recovery when it comes – becoming an integral part of a twenty-first century ‘never again’ reaction? Impossible to foretell. But it is a mighty and a marvellous ambition so to organise ourselves – and to find the words and thoughts that fit both with our 2000-year tradition and what has recently become of us – that the chances of this happening are maximised to the full.

#### Notes

1 George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’, first published in *Horizon*, April 1946. It is now most easily found in Peter Davison (ed), *Orwell and Politics*, (Penguin, 2001), pp.397–410.

2 *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an interdependent world*, Cm 7291, (Stationery Office, March 2008); *Security for the Next Generation. The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Update 2009*, Cm 7590, (Stationery Office, June 2009).

3 Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, (Papermac, 1965), p.403.

4 Douglas Hurd and Edward Young, *Choose Your Weapons: The British Foreign Secretary. 200 Years of Argument, Success and Failure*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2010), p.371.

5 Mervyn King, ‘Finance: A Return from Risk’, speech to the Worshipful Company of International Bankers, Mansion House, 17 March 2009.

6 Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,

7 J.M.Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, (Macmillan, 1936), p.383.

8 ‘Why only minds like ours could think up religion’, *New Scientist*, 14 March 2009.

9 Peter Brierley, ‘Religion’, in A.H.Halsey and Josephine Webb (eds) *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, (Macmillan, 2000), pp.650–51.

- 10 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, (Blackwell, 1994).
- 11 Evelyn Waugh, *Ronald Knox*, (Chapman & Hall, 1959), pp.209–46.
- 12 Ronald Knox, *Caliban in Grub Street*, (Sheed and Ward, 1930), pp.2–3.
- 13 A.O.Bell (ed), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV, 1931–35*, (1982), p.208, diary entry for 19 April 1934.
- 14 Riazat Butt, 'UK haunted by religion, says archbishop', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2009.
- 15 Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt, 'Race to save summit deal as man dies in City protest', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2009.
- 16 Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p.564.
- 17 J.M.Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, (Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952), pp.358–74. (It was first published in 1931 and the essay itself was delivered as a lecture in 1930).
- 18 Mark Fox to the author, March 2009.
- 19 Abbot Barry OSB and Esther de Waal, *The Rule of St.Benedict*, (Gracewing, 1990).
- 20 David Knowles, 'The Rule of St.Benedict' in *Knowles, Saints and Scholars: Twenty-Five Medieval Portraits*, (CUP, 1962), p.10.
- 21 Caroline White, 'Introduction', in *The Rule of St.Benedict*, (Penguin Classics, 2008), p.xxv.
- 22 Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, p.367.
- 23 Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950*, (OUP, 2006).
- 24 The piece was published as Peter Hennessy, 'Blessed Are... "Our Own Correspondents"',