

Lecture by Fr Paddy on Secularism and the Church

Very recently Pope Benedict XVI has attacked the rise of aggressive secularism in Western society which is at risk of drifting into, what he calls, "deserts of godlessness". During his Good Friday sermon, he compared the deliberate attempts to purge religion from public life to the mockery of Jesus by the mob as he was led out to be crucified.

For a lot of secularists 'religious sentiments' are increasingly ranked among the unwelcome leftovers of a bygone age. The sense of the sacred has been allowed to erode from the political and civil landscape. Values and norms which held societies together and drew people to higher ideals have been thrown overboard. The Pope has said that Christians should respond to the situation by growing in faith and not allow our modern society to drift into nihilism'. (a belief that life is pointless and human values worthless)

Today we see the rise of an intolerant form of secularism in the West which seeks to purge traditionally Christian societies of their religious character. This was seen recently in hospitals where Christians have been reprimanded or even fired for offering to pray for patients or wearing a religious symbol such as a medal or cross round their necks. These people were not pushing religion on to people but happy to show that they were Christian.

The same applies to hospital chaplains. The National secular society said that chaplains should be paid for by religious bodies rather than the N.H.S. Terry Sanderson, the president of the secular society said that the 40million pounds spent on chaplains would be better spent on doctors, nurses, cleaners and equipment. However, out of the NHS 110 billion pounds budget, 40 millions seem a small price to pay for a service which is valued by the majority of people. After all, the government announced this week that it is going to spend 10 million on bees – you know those things which buzz. The NHS

seems to be listening more to the buzz of the secularists than the churches because they are cutting the hours which chaplains are employed. This may be the thin edge of the wedge for cutting out paid chaplaincy altogether.

The same is true with the furore surrounding adoption agencies when the government passed the equality Bill. This put the catholic adoption services in a quandary because the church believes a child is best placed in a traditional Mum/Dad married family setting. According to the mind of the Church, the government, in bringing in this equality bill, did not have the wellbeing of the children at heart which they say is paramount. This is another example of the church being sidelined to suit the growing band of secularists who dismiss our beliefs.

Then there were those silly adverts on buses in London and other European cities which ran: 'there is probably no God so stop worrying and enjoy your life'. What was striking is not only the claim that God might not exist but its implication that God is an enemy of happiness. Fr. Cantalamessa, the well known preacher to the papal household, said recently that shutting out God from social life is the principal source of man's unhappiness and the root cause of the social evils which afflict humanity

Aggressive secularism can also be seen as the one of the main causes of the down turn in the economy. So many people today are jobless and homeless because the elite members of the financial world were irresponsible with ordinary people's money to feed their insatiable appetite for profit in order to build up their secular empire while lavishly 'lining their own pockets with bonuses' at the same time. Surely that is unbridled secularism. The laws of God were deleted from the banker's charter and replaced with those of 'mammon'.

Coming to the question of schools, I notice that there is a growing consensus among the NUT members that faith schools should be phased out. They say that they are elitist, which they

are not. Playing the elitist card is just another smokescreen for purging God from the classroom and making schools entirely secular institutions. Considering that it was Catholic Church which first established schools and universities in the western world it seems rather arrogant to suggest that the church should dissociate itself from mainstream education to suit these secularists.

And if you think the secularists are confined to the UK, those in mainland Europe are much more vociferous. In the proposed drafts of the European constitution, there's not a mention of the Church which everyone knows had the greatest influence in shaping Western civilization. These secular E.U. politicians would probably see themselves as the heirs of the French Enlightenment which deified 'Reason' over religious faith. This is a far cry from Belloc's famous dictum which said: "Europe is the faith and the faith is Europe.

Then, in the world of broadcasting there is more evidence of the secular agenda. A typical example was a broadcaster on the World Service recently reviewing a book on ecology. When he discovered that it was based on a religious premise, he announced he found it almost impossible to take seriously. Another was a newspaper columnist on Radio 4 speaking of a friend, perfect in every way, except for being a serious Christian – someday her friends hoped she would grow up and break free. The interviewer did not seem aware that the great majority of his listeners would wonder what the famous BBC was doing giving airtime to an idiot, nor had it dawned on the columnist that being a Christian might have something to do with her friend's agreeable qualities.

There is an idea bandied about by the secularists that you have to be dumb to be religious, and that religion is a lost cause. The religious person is not to be taken seriously. They should not be without their leper's bell or their white stick when engaging with the 'real world'.

Of course the secularists begrudgingly tolerate religious people but only if they keep their quaint beliefs to themselves. Deciding what is right or wrong is a private matter, they say. It is up to the person themselves to decide what is ethical or not. Since secular Man has dethroned God there is no need to refer to the Bible or the church when deciding on moral issues. As I said secularists can just about tolerate 'religious people' so long as they don't go public with their weird beliefs. What they object to is that religion should have any part to play in secular establishments. Now, since the church is missionary by nature we can't accept the fact that religion is a purely private matter. Catholics don't believe in 'bible bashing' like some protestant sects but we have a duty to spread the gospel in obedience to the Lord's command. This mission is by no means confined to priests. The church says that the vocation of the lay person is to build up God's kingdom in the secular world.

So I believe that the rise of secularism can also be laid at the feet of the church itself which includes lay people as well as clergy. When dealing with the secular establishment I believe the church has been far too compliant. Political correctness, even if it's anti-gospel, seems to be the order of the day both within and outside the church. We daren't mention abortion because we might hurt people in our congregations. When is the last time you heard mentioned the wrongness of living together from the pulpit? A while ago I challenged the bishop of Arundel and Brighton by email for writing an article in the Catholic Herald which was at odds with the church's teaching on contraception. I said to him that if he was right, then the Magisterium of the Church has been telling us 'porkys' all along. And then I added: 'Of course you might be conceivably wrong and the Pope right. Needless to say I got no reply'.

Bishops are not what they used be. The reason why secularists are making such headway is because Catholics also have been infected by the secular way of thinking. Tony Blair wasn't five minutes in the Church when he was already telling the Pope what to do and, with the Anglican Church hopelessly divided on

moral issues, our combined counter attack on secularism is very much diluted. But the Catholic Church also has a case to answer.

The hierarchy over the past few years has got very wrapped up with child protection issues because the government has been telling the bishops to get their act together and not cover up abuse like they did in the past. That's fair enough. However, we hear very little from the majority of those same bishops about child evangelization which is the reason the Church exists. Regarding safeguarding issues when Lady Crumpetly sneezes, the bishops jump but when the Pope speaks on issues which are at odds with the secularists or are seen to be politically incorrect by the powers that be, we rarely hear bishops or priests publicly endorsing the Holy Father's teaching.

If Labour were still in power they would have us teach explicit sex education to five year olds which, to me, is a form of abuse of their innocence. This had to be the product of a godless misguided secular mindset. But thank God the present government has seen sense and dropped the idea no after exerted pressure from such groups as SPUC and Family Education Trust.

So, if the church doesn't show more of its teeth on these ethical issues then the secularists will have a field day. The rise of secularism in society should be a wake-up call for the church in the West – it has been playing it safe for far too long. I thought the fairly new Archbishop of Westminster might be the man to rally the troops but judging by his recent remarks on civil partnerships he's already put a dent in his leadership. I think he can kiss goodbye to his red hat.

Yes, secularism is the godless philosophy of the age in which we live but it is not making people any happier and the sooner we heed the Pope's words the happier we will be as a society