Speaking Truth to Power: Religion and Secular Society – some Brief Thoughts from a Christian Perspective – Alan Murray 31/10/11

The conflict between the free expression of religious beliefs, or of values based on religious beliefs is as old as the earliest written documents of the Abrahamic religions. In the Old Testament, the running contest between the moral and social agenda of prophetic tradition and the abuses of power by kings and ruling class, is succeeded at the time of the writing of the New Testament, by the contest between the Christian critique, and the actions of corrupt and oppressive emperors. Jesus Christ's brief but powerful statement on the duties of a Jewish citizen in a Roman Empire 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's' has underpinned Christian thinking on separation between church and state throughout European history; Paul and Augustine further developed the basic right of the Christian or anyone else not only to 'speak truth to power!' (the Prophetic tradition) but to actively resist unjust laws, based on Jesus' distinction between the Kingdom of God, and State Power.

Although often blurred at times and in some European states over the past 2000 years, that distinction has held good in mainstream Christian tradition. Modern Christian leaders in Europe, notably Pope Benedict and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, have engaged in public debate on the meaning of secularism and its limitations. Williams' (2006) distinction between 'programmatic[1] (or ideological) secularism, and[2] procedural (or pragmatic) secularism has been found useful in European contexts, as well as in the particular context of the secular settlement in Britain, with its state church, alongside a long tradition of freedom of expression of belief and religion, and a secular education system.

Procedural secularism, such as that put forward In Evan Harris's 'A Secularist Manifesto'[3] seeks to maximise the contributions of religion and belief traditions to public debate. Freedom of expression of religious, non-religious beliefs in the public square is limited only where it harms others, or limits the freedom of others to express their own beliefs. In the highly pluralist context of british society, it has been supported by the vast majority of Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups in UK as well as newer religious groups, and of course atheists, humanists and agnostics, and has led to a strong version of multiculturalism. Certain issues, such as gay marriage, abortion, contraception, the wearing of certain forms of religious dress, remain contentious, and strong views are expressed from the perspectives of the various religions and beliefs, but it is accepted by all that it is the responsibility of parliament to take decisions on such issues.

Programmatic secularism seeks to exclude religion from the public square and to treat all forms of religion and belief as a purely private matter. But in doing so it runs the risk of imposing one form of belief, and one set of values and value system – claimed to be based on reason, science and rational argument - on debate in the public square and indeed on wider society. Such a secularism can therefore appear to seek to *diminish* the diversity of human expression, at least on matters of public policy and debate. A regime which adopts a programmatic version of secularism (just as in a programmatic version of religious rule) is in danger of developing a totalising ideology which can lead not only to restrictions of freedom of expression for some groups, or even oppression or persecution, as has been the case in many of both explicitly religious and atheist regimes in the twentieth century. Restrictions on the right to wear certain forms of religious dress in some European countries are criticised on these grounds.

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[1] In a lecture at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome on: Secularism, Faith and Freedom

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[2] UK Muslim scholars prefer a distinction between ideological and procedural secularism, but have essentially concurred with Williams' definitions.

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[3] Summarised in the Guardian 16.10.11 (web ref.
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/sep/18/secularist-manifesto-secularism)

The European Union is based on the European Treaties, culminating in the Treaty of Lisbon which integrated the Charter of Fundamental Rights, including freedom of religion and belief. In fact all states which sign the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights this distinction holds good. But it should be noted that these declarations and charters are not the preserve of 'laicistes", but were drawn up by representatives from all kinds of religion and belief traditions. (Catholics and Muslims, as well as Humanists, have laid claim to be the originators of the modern notion of human rights)[4].

Mainstream Christianity's political thought was born in the pluralist, multi-faith society of Rome. It draws as much on the sceptical, non-religious, rationalist tradition of Greek philosophy, and on the natural law tradition of Rome, as on its Jewish heritage. In modern times, it has remained generally faithful to a procedural secularist political outlook. The 10 year dialogue between Joseph Ratzinger, as he then was, and the philosopher Jurgen Habermas[5], was essentially a debate about the limits of secularism and of the religious domain. In that debate, though the terms they used were different, it was Habermas who moved away from a hardline programmatic version of secularism towards a procedural version, accepting greater rights for the church and religions to express themselves freely on political issues in a genuinely plural Europe.

It is to this tradition, which requires them to 'speak truth to power' whenever political rulers take decisions which run counter to their values, that the huge majority of Christians across Europe are committed. But as citizens of modern democracies in such a plural Europe, they recognise that their views will not always prevail.

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[1] For a Catholic perspective, see Pope Benedict's Berlin speech of 8/10/11 (web reference).   For a Muslim perspective, see the article: *Human Rights, an Islamic Concept?* - in *Contextualising Islam in Europe* p 45-48 - Cambridge Centre for Islamic Studies 2011.

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