

CHRISTIAN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN A SECULARISED SOCIETY

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'IF ANY MP REALLY THINKS THEIR PERSONAL RELIGIOUS VIEWS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER EVERYTHING ELSE THEN THEY SHOULD LEAVE THE HOUSE OF COMMONS. Their place is in church, mosque, synagogue or temple. Parliament is the place for compromises, for negotiations in a secular sphere under the general overhead light of the liberal tradition.'

No, not Richard Dawkins again. This is Jackie Ashley, a leading *Guardian* columnist generally known for her balanced and insightful views on current affairs.¹ What occasioned this bizarre command was an intervention by Roman Catholic Cardinals who had been so reckless as to take the opportunity of the upcoming fortieth anniversary of the Abortion Act to remind Catholic MPs of their moral responsibilities when legislation involving abortion came before them. She asserted, boldly but absurdly, that such an overt appeal to religious belief in a political debate was 'wholly against our constitution and tradition'. To be fair, some *Guardian* writers on religion are less strident than this. Stephen Bates and Madeleine Bunting, for example, have often provided thoughtful commentary on religious affairs, even though I don't always endorse their conclusions. And I still find that *The Guardian* offers the best coverage of social, economic and global affairs. But Ashley's uncharacteristically intemperate rhetoric is indicative of a widely held and intensely felt prejudice against appealing to religious convictions in the public square, one which is increasingly rising angrily to the surface of public debate.

It is examples such as these that most immediately come to the minds of many Christians when they think of Britain as a 'secularised' society. And there are many at hand today. This is no isolated case – it seems to exemplify an attitude of hardening intolerance in certain circles towards the contributions which people of religious faith wish to make in the public arena. But it is, of course, not by any means the whole picture. The government's recent commitment to expanding provision for 'faith schools', at a time when church schools already make up a quarter of the state sector, is only one example of a new phase of cooperation between the state and faith-based social agencies. To be sure, such cooperation often comes with tight strings (sometimes under the guise of 'equality rights') attached, but initiatives like these must serve as a balancing factor in any account of how 'secularised' British public life has become.

The societal landscape is complex. On the one hand, there is evidence of advanced public secularisation, on

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the other, of a qualified retreat from it. At the same time, the public realm is not *simply* secular: it is also religiously *plural*. While secularism is arguably the dominant paradigm within which public debate and public policymaking are conducted, a widening diversity of religious voices are being heard and sometimes heeded. What implications does this shifting landscape have for the shape and content of Christian public engagement today? There are many possible ways to answer that question. Here I want to examine just one set of issues, related to the diverse institutional contexts from which such engagement may be mounted.

I want to do so in dialogue with an influential sociologist of religion, José Casanova. Over a decade ago Casanova made a noteworthy intervention in the long-running academic debate over secularisation in a widely discussed book *Public Religions in the Modern World*. In the book Casanova mounted an insightful critique and reformulation of the account of secularisation that had hitherto dominated discussion. He distinguished between three different senses of secularisation that had too often been conflated: (1) secularisation as the *decline* of religion; (2) secularisation as the *privatisation* of religion; and (3) secularisation as the *differentiation* of the religious sphere from other spheres.²

Casanova begins by describing the far-reaching process of institutional differentiation that has occurred in modernity, a process in which the religious authority of the Church came to be clearly demarcated from various forms of secular authority – of business corporations, universities, government, the family, etc. This was a contested and often a bloody process. But most Christians today would recognise one overwhelmingly positive outcome from it, namely the eventual acceptance of the principle of religious toleration, or, as I prefer to call it, the principle of the confessional impartiality of the state. On this principle, the state recognises that it simply lacks the competence to adjudicate in matters of religion, and thereby accords equal legal freedom to all religions willing to live within the law of the land. Note that confessional impartiality does not mean the imposition of an ideology of public secularism, only a proper respect for the unique authorities of individual religious conscience and of religious associations. Nor does it imply a French-style (or even an American-style) 'separation of church and state'; it is compatible with extensive constructive cooperation between the two. And neither does confessional impartiality imply a 'naked' or a morally

neutral public square. The public square will always betray the influence of one or more moral and religious traditions; the only questions are 'which', 'how', and 'with what results'.

Casanova's observation about institutional differentiation was not original, but the challenge to the prevailing theory of secularisation which he drew from it was new. The process of differentiation, he argued persuasively, does not at all imply that religion must inevitably decline or be relegated to the private sphere. Secularisation as 'differentiation' does not in itself require either secularisation as 'religious decline' or secularisation as 'privatisation'. An immensely important conclusion follows: a bar on the Church dominating the state or on the state dominating the Church does not mean that the public realm must be secularised, that is, devoid of religious influence. Indeed, Casanova points out that the modern world has in fact been witnessing the 'de-privatisation' of religion; 'public religion' has been returning in many places where sociologists had claimed it was on its way out. Of course, Casanova could not have anticipated in 1994 what extremely diverse, and sometimes terrifying, forms it would assume. But in many instances public religion is beginning to make a substantial and constructive return to the public realm, such that secular liberal democratic theorists are struggling to bring their dated modernist analyses of the role of religion in politics up to date.

Casanova's account attracted many responses and the discussion it aroused has progressed since his book appeared.³ But his account remains instructive for our topic because of some important practical conclusions he drew from it. These concerned the *appropriate social locations* from which public religion would be able to make a credible contribution to public debate, under conditions of differentiation. Casanova distinguished three levels – the state; political society; civil society – at which public religion might potentially function in such conditions.

Public religion at the level of the *state* might potentially take the form of an officially established Church. But such an arrangement would be an inconsistent vestige of a pre-differentiated society which would in time gradually wither on the vine. Casanova may or may not be right in this prediction. And Christians in Britain still differ over the theological and pragmatic merits of established churches.⁴ But I'll leave this matter aside since it is Casanova's views on the other two levels which I find most instructive.⁵

NOTES

1. Jackie Ashley, 'Cardinals, back off from this war with women and state', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2007.
2. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 7.
3. See, e.g., David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).
4. For a survey of evangelical views, see *Faith and Nation: Report of a Commission of Inquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance* (Evangelical Alliance, 2006).
5. Useful reflections on the question of establishment are found in David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
6. I would quarrel with some aspects of the foregoing analysis (e.g. Christian Democracy is as much an example of the third as of the second variant) but I won't press that argument here.
7. Casanova, *Public Religions*, pp. 57–8.
8. *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response: A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983); *Economic Justice For All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). British parallels easily come to mind: *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation: Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), and *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* published in 1997 by the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales.
9. Casanova notes, quite rightly, that 'No other sphere of the *saeculum* would prove more secular and more unsusceptible to moral regulation than the capitalist market'; in this sphere, he says, 'the religious roots dried up', *Public Religions*, p. 23. But the new exemplary forms of public religion are 'challenging the claims of states and markets to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations' (see p. 5).
10. Casanova, *Public Religions*, p. 219.
11. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006); www.ekklesia.co.uk.

'Christians need not only "speak truth to power". They are fully entitled also to "put power to the service of truth"'

► Public religion at the level of *political society* is visible in a wide range of religiously inspired political movements emerging over the last two centuries. Such movements have sought not just influence but also political office in order to advance specific religiously motivated objectives through legislation or even wider constitutional change. Within this category Casanova distinguishes three variants.

First, those motivated by a negative impulse to turn differentiation back and so to defend establishment, or perhaps to introduce it where it did not yet exist; such, he claims, have no future.

Second, those mobilised to oppose secularist political movements such as atheistic liberalism and Marxist socialism (e.g. Christian Democracy), and what he calls 'Protestant fundamentalism' (i.e. the 'religious right' in the USA).

Third, those established for the positive purpose of promoting 'modern' objectives like democracy, civil society, human rights and religious liberty.⁶

Public religion has also made its presence felt at the level of *civil society*, and in one of two forms. One form, which Casanova calls 'hegemonic civil religions' (e.g. nineteenth-century American evangelicalism), is also destined to die out under modern conditions. But the second has a bright future because, by respecting institutional differentiation, it *flows with the current of modernity*. Casanova cites as examples forms of public religion which, rather than seeking to oppose modern liberal democracy, have actually sought to contribute to sustaining it in one or more of the following ways: (1) by acting to protect vital spheres of traditional life, such as the family, against intrusion from the state (e.g. the case of the Catholic Cardinals above); (2) by supporting democratising movements (e.g. religiously inspired political movements in Eastern Europe or in Latin American countries such as Chile or Nicaragua); (3) by offering critical normative reflections on major areas of public policy.⁷

Clearly Casanova thinks modernity is particularly conducive to the *third* of these types of activity. He cites as his favoured examples two influential statements published in the 1980s by the US Catholic bishops in *The Challenge of Peace and Economic Justice for All*.⁸

Casanova presents these as cases where religion speaks creatively into the public sphere in order to challenge prevailing normative assumptions and to propose alternatives inspired by a different vision. Such

alternatives, while rooted in theological principles, are translated into publicly accessible language, and thereby able to elevate public debate by injecting into it a tone of serious moral reflection. In particular, he claims, the US bishops' statements challenge the prevailing secularist assumption that areas such as the military or the economy are beyond moral evaluation.⁹

This is the most characteristic potential contribution of public religion to modern politics – on the one hand, renouncing the anachronistic desire for state privilege or direct political power, and, on the other, functioning constructively as critical voices alongside many others within a pluralistic society.

But Casanova goes on to draw a controversial conclusion from his analysis: it is *only from this third level*, the level of civil society, that public religion can appropriately contribute to political action in a modern liberal democracy: 'Only public religions at the level of civil society are consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures.'¹⁰ Rather than operating directly on the sphere of state and government, any public religion with a future must come to terms with its strategic but limited place as one contributor to normative discourse from the public sphere of civil society.

The notion that religion should 'speak truth to power' rather than attempt to wield political power itself is gaining a huge following in British churches today. Witness the popularity of the 'post-Christendom' stance advocated by writers such as Stuart Murray, Jonathan Bartley, Simon Barrow, and the Ekklesia think-tank.¹¹ Such a position correctly grasps a crucial feature of our contemporary context. It proceeds from an honest recognition of the churches' often ambivalent and at times hopelessly compromised or frankly violent use of its historic political power, and a desire to renounce any remaining privileges. Insofar as this implies a stance of public modesty and an acceptance of a legitimate plurality of religious and other voices in the public square, the 'post-Christendom' analysis is one we must take seriously.

Indeed, let's put the point positively. There is an enormous potential contribution that can be made, and to some degree is already being made, by Christian and other religious voices, drawing on the wisdom of their own confessional traditions, as they participate in open public debate on the major issues of our times: the degradation of the natural environment; the continuing scandal of avoidable poverty; the need for respect for human dignity at the beginning and ending of life; the

role of peacemaking initiatives in civil and global conflicts; the need for a more holistic model of education; and so forth. Here, Christians are able to work within (what Casanova calls) the public sphere of civil society to inform and improve debates, to challenge ideological blind-spots, and to imagine workable policy resolutions. Over the long haul, this is likely to be the most formative contribution they could make to resisting the secularisation of society and politics. It will involve incrementally reshaping the political culture within which governmental activity takes place and on which such activity depends. At the level of the local church, it will demand a far-reaching reappraisal of missional and educational priorities if laypeople are to be equipped to meet this challenge.

But let's also note some troubling implications that will follow if Casanova's prediction that public religion will be confined to the level of civil society ever fully comes to pass. First, not only are the political efforts of the so-called 'religious right' thereby effectively disallowed (which condescending left-leaning European Christians might rejoice at), but so is much of the European Christian Democratic tradition (which, admittedly, British Christians generally don't understand or appreciate anyway). But second, and more seriously, it would disallow any organised religiously motivated movement campaigning or lobbying for significant legislative changes. Let's draw up a quick hitlist of groups thereby declared illicit: World Development Movement; Jubilee 2000; CARE; the Jubilee Centre. In other words, any Christian organisation which works not just to alter the debate but also to change the law is effectively out of date and out of bounds, at odds with the political imperatives of modernity.

But I would argue that Christian public engagement within a modern liberal democracy need not at all confine itself, as Casanova proposes (and as 'post-Christendom' advocates seem to imply), merely to the offering of discursive contributions from the platform of civil society, vitally important though such contributions are. Christians may in principle freely avail themselves of every available avenue of political influence afforded by a representative constitutional democracy. Which avenues they select at any one time will depend on many contextual factors: opportunities, resources and circumstances. Christians, like anyone else, will have to make careful prudential judgments on when, where, how, and over what issues to take up public engagement. But they need not only 'speak truth to power'. They are fully entitled also to 'put power to the service of truth'. ■