

EDITORIAL

ANN HOLT

'THEY'VE CHANGED OUR LOCAL PALAIS INTO A BOWLING ALLEY AND THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE'

So went the opening lines of the old song. Change happens as much to the social and religious landscape as anything else. 'The spiritual and cultural landscape has changed in Britain', writes Stephen Backhouse in the opening article of this edition of *Transmission* on secularisation. Every individual and society not only has to cope with change; we are a part of it. Some have the responsibility of shaping it; others have to manage it. So it was that I found myself at a workshop hosted by the Charity Commission, to examine the public benefit (or not) of religion in our so-called secular society.

One of the changes that the charitable world is facing is that the benefit to the public of all charities, including religious charities, will need to be more strenuously demonstrated. They will not, if you like, be given the benefit of the doubt. Is this a result of secularisation or a valiant attempt to manage an increasingly plural public square? And in that management will there be scope for genuine diversity or will the secular voice of the rationalistic young civil servant, working on liaison with faith groups in a government department, sitting next to me at the consultation, prevail? His view was illustrated by the lunch that we were given. No meat option for us carnivores! It was all vegetarian so as not to offend.

Everything was reduced to the lowest common factor. 'Quite right', according to the young man. We should only allow the ethics and practices that are shared by a grown up, modern secular society to obtain, and to the extent that a particular religion has something positive to contribute it will be allowed to come to the party or lunch. However, if the beliefs and practices of a faith are exclusive to the point of offending some, that would pose a problem and it became clear during our discussion that while proselytism would be allowed (for now?) there was little enthusiasm for it on the part of those who might find themselves the objects of missionary zeal. All of this is strongly predicated on an assumption that Europe and Britain are now irrevocably secular and that that is a good thing. But are we really secular and what does that mean anyway? These are the questions that this issue of *The Bible in Transmission* seeks to address.

That Britain and indeed Western Europe are no longer dominated by Christianity is largely agreed upon. Indeed it now takes a coalition of Christians and Muslims to defend Christmas in the face of an attempt by a secularist think-tank to downgrade it. 'While it might be difficult to ban it altogether...' apparently begins a sentence in a soon to be published IPPR Report.

Interesting that they should want to try! Who really finds the preservation of our Christian heritage and the practice of a living Christian faith at Christmas offensive today? The Christian Muslim Forum has said that members of both faiths found it offensive when people downplayed Christmas in the mistaken belief it could upset minorities. Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra says 'We would not be happy with the downplaying of any festival. We don't believe that equality is achieved by downgrading anyone.' Judging by the numbers who still flock to our cathedrals and churches at this season a residual Christianity lives on and the vast majority are definitely not offended by this low level Christian activity

Certainly, as Backhouse writes, 'to have faith and live as an authentic Christian is no longer to reside in the status quo ... [it] has become a minority, radical and even offensive stance.' But he argues that we can use that necessary offence 'to clear away the happenings of Christendom in order to get to the heart of the Christian message'. A position echoed in Jonathan Bartley's piece on 'Undermining Christendom' which, in the Anabaptist tradition, he sees as 'a golden opportunity to explore new ways of engagement that seem to correspond with the gospel', often seeing the world from a more Christ-like position among the marginalised and the disenfranchised.

Jonathan Chaplin takes up this theme of public engagement in a secularised society. He illustrates the role that the press and media play in stridently driving the secularisation process but also points out that the situation is more complex than the press (or my young civil servant) would have us believe, a point amply illustrated in the latest edition of *The Economist*, which has an 18-page supplement on faith and politics in today's world entitled 'In God's Name'. It seems that contrary to the expectations of ardent secularists, religion will not go away, which is why we must understand the place of religion in 21st-century Europe, argues the eminent sociologist of religion, Grace Davie, in her powerful analysis in the fourth article of this edition. She argues that we should not undervalue the place of vicarious religion – 'the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number who not only understand but quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing', reason enough not to be cowed by civil servants or secular humanists alike and something we may well need to remember if another political advisor with an IPPR history gets his way with Ed Balls, the current Secretary of State for Education, over the right for church schools to have any



ANN HOLT
is Executive Director, Bible Society (England & Wales).

NOTES

1. (London:SPCK, 1992).
2. (3rd rev'd edn.; London: Duckworth, 2007).

► control over their admissions, a right so essential to maintaining their ethos. And a right with which the majority of parents concurs. Again, as Chaplin puts it, we are in 'a new phase of cooperation between state and faith-based social agencies [but] such cooperation often comes with tight strings attached'.

In such a phase there is still the opportunity for Christians and those of other faiths to continue to enter the discourse rather than abandon it at a time when, according to David Landrum, the moral influence of biblical Christianity is less and less discernable. He quotes the Human Rights activist Francesca Klug saying that 'Human rights are now probably as significant as the Bible has been in shaping modern western values.' That may be true but in a democracy Christians have as much right to share in composing and calling the tune today as other members of society. We do not always have to dance to the tune of others

At Bible Society, we are seeking to be the architect of initiatives in education, politics, media and the arts that create opportunities to tell the Christian story and demonstrate Christian living once more, often more in dialogue and modelling than by declaration. We share Steve Holmes view that 'human beings are in fact incurably religious' and left to themselves will afford power to a whole range of gods and demons. It is into this plurality that we speak and demonstrate the Christian gospel, including engaging in something akin to the 'secular' approach of Isaiah 'deconstructing the enchantment of the world by exposing the banal origins of the things rendered awesome and sacred'. Holmes quotes GK Chesterton who famously said, 'People who give up believing in God don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.'

In *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*¹ Lesslie Newbigin said that we must proclaim the gospel in public conversations in every discipline because in so doing we will be offering hope into a future that will not belong so much to the secularist or pluralists but to the barbarians. According to Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*² the barbarians are already among us, creating a society which might more accurately be described as hedonistically consumerist rather than secular but is clearly not at ease with itself and is searching for something more. The reduction of the options to the secular alone will not fully satisfy or please, just as the lunch at the consultation left me knowing that there was something missing. It was the meat! ■