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Director of Policy William Chapman speaks at Cambridge University 26th October 2008

HALF A MILE FROM THE VILLAGE:
AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT EVENSONG
AT CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
26TH OCTOBER 2008

I recently met the polling organisation, Gallup, to learn more about their World Poll - a survey conducted annually across the world in up to 140 countries.

I have a dreadful memory and, what is more, my attention tends to wander. And Gallup's offices, high up, have a spectacular view of the Thames - so my attention was more than usually tempted to be vagabond. But one fact in particular stuck in my memory.

In Sierra Leone, if a woman travels more than half a mile, or indeed rather less, from her home village, the likelihood of her being abused or attacked, raped or murdered, goes up exponentially.

So, naturally, most women only take that risk if they really have to.

Think what life would be like for you here, if you could not travel as far as Grantchester without running that sort of risk, let alone London, let alone places further afield. What losses there would be in intellectual exchange, in commercial opportunity, in sociability.

And I think this is an apt image for what is happening in this country and in many others in Europe. There are increasingly the villages of faith - and the villages of the secular world. There is religious space - increasingly privatised. And there is public space, increasingly, though not uniformly, averse to religious voices being heard.

This is not healthy either for society or for faith. I want to highlight two of the reasons why we should address this state of affairs urgently.

The first has arisen in the last few weeks - the financial crisis. For this has not simply been a failure of regulation, of systems, or even altogether of intelligence. To take this country, even if the Bank of England did lack the precise powers to intervene, if the Bank had spoken out in warning sufficiently strongly of course it would have had an impact, powers or no powers.

No, the crisis has arisen because, in part, of a serious rupture between the system and certain basic values - values such as stewardship, trust, sustainability, responsibility to a common good. All these are values about which religions have much to say. It would seem sensible therefore to find a way of drawing on the resources of wisdom in the faith traditions, and elsewhere, in stimulating a new culture within the system,

The second urgent reason for tackling this rupture is religion's contribution, at least in the West, to a humane liberalism and to all that flows from that in the way of the ordering of society and democracy, all that flows from the Judaeo-Christian high doctrine of human dignity.

The philosopher Jurgen Habermas has reflected that we cannot afford to sever society from the 'important resources of meaning' which religious traditions can provide. Another philosopher, Jeremy Waldron, has suggested that we cannot shape an adequate and sustainable conception of basic human equality apart from some religious foundation.

But let me make one observation here - to widen the context in which we need to consider this issue. And this is that Europe is pretty much the exception in terms of this rupture between faith and society. In much of the world there is still an intensely close connection. And in much of the world religion is growing and not in retreat.

In Africa, for example, in 1900 there were 10 million Christians. By 2000, 360 million.

The proportion of people attached to the world's four largest regions - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism - rose from 67% in 1900 to 73% in 2005.



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Even in Communist China - still Communist China, just - the Little Red Book of Mao has apparently been replaced as a best seller by the Analects of Confucius, with over 6 million copies sold over the last few years.

As Peter Berger, the American sociologist, has said, 'We don't live in an age of secularity, we live in an age of explosive, pervasive religiosity'.

And of course a huge amount of good is done by members of religions. Both individually and corporately, they help to bring about the vision of fullness and abundance expressed in the psalm we heard this evening.

The difficulty is that this pervasive religiosity also all too often presents an ugly face to the world, an alienating face, that in itself contributes to the rupture between faith and society.

Whether it be the Islamic state of Iran, executing a teenager for being gay, or the closeness of some members of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Milosevic regime, or the extremism of some Jewish settlers, or murderous Hindu mobs in Orissa - such things diminish the claims of religion to be taken seriously by the rest of the world.

As the newly appointed Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, Nigel Biggar, has said, 'with its propensity for dividing the world into the righteous and the unrighteous religion is well able to pour petrol on the flames of secular strife...all too often, religion gives new life to its liberal stereotype, snatching it back from the graveyard of cliches'.

So what is the answer? Well, there is of course no easy answer - there are no easy answers, plural. Indeed, in this intellectual quest I am reminded of Michael Oakeshott's remark that 'life is a predicament, not a journey'.

But I believe that two theories may help us in our particular predicament - those of thin religiosity and thick faith, two concepts recently adapted and developed by Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale. Or, given the slang meaning of 'thick' in the UK, one might refer to them perhaps as shallow religiosity and deep faith.

Thin religiosity acts as a marker of group identity, defining identity by reinforcing boundaries; provides social cohesion by soothing the group psyche and legitimising group interests (often regardless of whether they are good or harmful); and offers little or no vision of human flourishing except in perhaps a limited and self-serving way. This thin religiosity is likely to have the effect of deepening conflict.

Thick or deep faith, on the other hand, is an account of self, society, nature and the good which defines identity by or from its centre not the boundary; gives its adherents sufficient rootedness to give them the courage to move out beyond the boundaries whilst confident of their own identity, and fosters a vision of human flourishing which is more likely to promote peace.

It is by developing that thick or deep faith that we, as people of faith, are most likely to be encouraged to go beyond the boundaries of our own denominational or faith villages.

And that is what the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, for which I work, is attempting to do in partnership with others.

Our aims are to:

- show faith as a positive force, especially through interfaith action;
- help deepen understanding and trust between the faiths;
- and deepen an understanding of the forces of, and relationship between, faith and globalisation.

First, action, rather than dialogue - though I recognise of course that dialogue itself is a form of action. Many excellent bodies are already engaged in pursuing dialogue and we do not want to duplicate their good work. So initially, we are focusing on a campaign to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals, by tackling malaria - a disease which could be eradicated but which scandalously still claims the lives of over 800,000 people a year. We are developing inter faith programmes in four African countries for the better distribution of bednets and training in their use, and an inter faith alliance in countries in the West to support this initiative.

Secondly, we want to help increase understanding between the faiths. For example, the recent Gallup poll showed that most Christians want better relations between Christianity and Islam but believe most Muslims don't. Most Muslims want better relations but think most Christians don't. So there exist huge gulfs of misunderstanding. We are therefore developing a schools programme, making full use of interactive resources, to give children in different countries and of different faiths, a real sense of lived experience of the other. It will cover primarily the six largest faiths, but possibly others as well.

It is also good sometimes to have a physical structure to act as a focus for the work of deeper understanding. So we are collaborating with this university and the Coexist Foundation to establish Abraham House in the heart of London, a place of encounter primarily for the three Abrahamic faiths and a place where Cambridge's pioneering interfaith academic programme can be taken out and tested at the grass roots.

Finally, we have devised and launched a course on faith and globalisation with Yale university. Globalisation is throwing people together as never before. The world is opening up; countries and cultures are coming together at astonishing speed. Large communities of different races and faiths now live as neighbours, where before oceans and continents would have separated them. Before, one might have gone a life time and hardly ever met someone of another creed. Now, a thousand high streets are microcosms of the world's diverse religious ecology.

And in this new dynamic, the role of faith becomes more acute. Given its power to move and motivate, it can either play a part in bringing people together in harmony around common values whilst respecting differences, or it can pull people and communities apart, with potentially disastrous results in a world as interdependent as ours now is.

So our course with Yale seeks to explore the dynamics of faith and globalisation and the potential for a more fruitful relationship between the two. Who knows, perhaps Cambridge will wish to take the course up?

I hope it has been clear that I have not been talking about evangelisation. I have been talking about a more respected place for religion in the public square, about developing more beneficial vocabularies of both relationships and actions.

Even Milton, alumnus of this college, whose anniversary we are celebrating, even Milton - staunch Puritan and from a highly polarised Christian culture - contrived to cross the boundaries of his faith village when in Italy, meeting prominent Roman Catholics and even staying as a guest of Cardinal Barberini, the Pope's nephew, in Rome.

At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, Gustave Flaubert said, 'Whatever else happens, we shall remain stupid'. The brute fact is that, in our current circumstances, we cannot afford to remain stupid. As people of faith we need to think smarter and more strategically, and behave with greater generosity, and we have to do it together. We must venture, and venture consistently, beyond the half mile boundaries of our respective villages.

Thank you.

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Registered Office: 66 Lincoln's Inn Fields / London / WC2A 3LH / United Kingdom