

FAITH AND GLOBALISATION

Let me summarise my argument to you this evening.

Under the momentum of globalisation the world is opening up, and at an astonishing speed. Old boundaries of culture, identity and even nationhood are falling.

The 21st C world is becoming ever more interdependent.

In this world, religious faith, crucial to so many people's culture and identity, can play a positive or a negative role. Either positively it will encourage peaceful co-existence by people of faith coming together in respect, understanding and tolerance, retaining their distinctive identity but living happily with those who do not share that identity. Or it will work against such co-existence by defining people by difference, those of one faith in opposition to others of a different faith.

In this context, inter-faith action and encounter are vital. They symbolise peaceful co-existence.

That is my primary argument. It is directed to people who have religious faith and those who have none.

However, I then go further and argue that religious faith is a good thing in itself, that so far from being a

reactionary force, it has a major part to play in shaping the values which guide the modern world, and can and should be a force for progress. But it has to be rescued on the one hand from the extremist and exclusionary tendency within religion today; and on the other from the danger that religious faith is seen as an interesting part of history and tradition but with nothing to say about the contemporary human condition.

I see Faith and Reason, Faith and Progress, as in alliance not contention.

One of the oddest questions I get asked in interviews (and I get asked a lot of odd questions) is:

is faith important to your politics?

It's like asking someone whether their health is important to them or their family.

If you are someone 'of faith' it is the focal point of belief in your life. There is no conceivable way that it wouldn't affect your politics.

But there is a reason why my former press secretary, Alastair Campbell once famously said 'We don't do God'. In our culture, here in Britain and in many other parts of Europe, to admit to having faith leads to a whole series of suppositions, none of which are very helpful to the practising politician.

First, you may be considered weird. Normal people aren't supposed to 'do God'.

Second, there is an assumption that before you take

a decision, you engage in some slightly cultish interaction with your religion – ‘So, God, tell me what you think of City Academies or Health Service Reform or nuclear power’ i.e. people assume that your religion makes you act, as a leader, at the promptings of an inscrutable deity, free from reason rather than in accordance with it.

Third, you want to impose your religious faith on others.

Fourth, you are pretending to be better than the next person.

And finally and worst of all, that you are somehow messianically trying to co-opt God to bestow a divine legitimacy on your politics.

So when Alastair said it, he didn’t mean politicians shouldn’t have faith; just that it was always a packet of trouble to talk about it.

And underlying it all, certainly, is the notion that religion is divisive, irrational and harmful. That is why for years, it was assumed that as humanity progressed intellectually and matured morally, so religion would decline.

Even ten years ago, religion was still being written off as a force in the world. For over 200 years, the view had grown that advanced men and women no

longer needed religion. It was a view rooted in the new thinking of the Enlightenment. It was a view reinforced by scientific discoveries which challenged traditional religious understandings of the nature of the world. A view underpinned by a belief in the inevitable progress of all humankind, but especially those branches of humankind who happened to live in the West. It was a view which increasingly confined religion to the private sphere. And it was a view which lasted a long time. As late as 2000 the Economist magazine published the so-called obituary of God in its Millennium issue.

But in fact at no time since the Enlightenment has religion ever gone away. It has always been at the very core of life for millions of people, the foundation of their existence, the motive for their behaviour, the thing which gives sense to their lives and purpose to their journeys – which makes life more than just a sparrow’s flight through a lighted hall from one darkness to another, in that memorable image of the Venerable Bede. In the last few years we have been reminded of the great power of religion.

We have seen its great power for good, for example in the Jubilee campaign, that great mass movement which did so much to help the poor of the world.

And in the last ten years we have also been reminded sharply, in acts of terror committed in the name of faith, that we ignore the power of religion at our peril.

But let us also recall for a moment the evils of the 20thC done in the furtherance of political ideology; fascism and the holocaust; communism and the millions of Stalin's victims. And recall how the heroic defiance of those evils was often led by men and women of faith.

Add to that the rich tradition of religion as a force for good in history.

Only last year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. Of course we need to remember that plenty of people of belief willingly engaged in the slave trade and enjoyed its profits. But we also need to recall that many of the leaders of the abolition movement came from the evangelical Clapham sect or the Society of Friends.

We need to recall the role of Christian and Jewish groups in instigating the Genocide Convention in 1948.

We can think of the great humanitarian enterprises which bring relief to those who are suffering – the Red Cross, the Red Crescent or Islamic Relief, CAFOD and Christian Aid, Hindu Aid and SEWA International, World Jewish Relief and Khalsa Aid - all the charities which draw inspiration from the teachings of the different faiths.

And of course all these bodies draw on the traditions

which the great world faiths have of social justice – the moral imperative of helping the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed, the weak and the powerless.

Think of Gandhi; of the radical and brave liberation priests of South America; of those that spoke out in the time of apartheid; of those that in their thousands and hundreds of thousands work in the poorest, most disease-ridden, conflict ravaged parts of Africa this day and every day.

Think of women religious fighting the trafficking of women and children around the world.

And in the West, for example, we owe an incalculable debt to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in terms of our concepts of human worth and dignity, law and democracy.

Reflect on the work done by churches, mosques, synagogues and temples in care for the sick or the elderly or the socially excluded.

Such work is selfless, often unremarked upon in society, often dramatic in lifting individual human anguish and suffering.

For all these actors faith is not something incidental to their actions. It is the wellspring of them, the font, the origin, the thing that makes these people who they are and do what they do.

To them their faith is realised in action: in commitment to others; in caring; in compassion; in an all-embracing feeling of solidarity. They believe they act as instruments of God's love when they perform such actions.

But enacted love of neighbour is one aspect only of what people think the faith communities represent.

Religion can present two other faces to the world.

One face is that of religion as extremism. There is no point in ducking this issue. Religious faith can give rise to extremism. It is most obviously associated with extremism in the name of Islam through the activities of Al Qaida and others. But we shouldn't kid ourselves. Even if by far most religious people are not prone to the use of terror, at least not nowadays, there are extremists in virtually every religion. And even where there is not extremism expressed in violence there is extremism expressed in the idea that a person's identity is to be found not merely in their religious faith, but in their faith as a means of excluding the other person who does not share it.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that it is extreme to believe your religious faith is the only true faith. Most people of faith do that. It doesn't stop them respecting those of a different faith or indeed of no faith. We should respect humanists too and celebrate

the good actions they do.

Faith is problematic when it becomes a way of denigrating those who do not share it, as somehow lesser human beings. Faith as a means of exclusion. God in this connection becomes not universal but partisan, faith not a means of reaching out in friendship but a means of creating or defining enemies. Miroslav Volf in his book 'Exclusion and Embrace' describes the difference brilliantly.

When those who are not of faith see such a face presented as religion, they turn away from it, understandably repelled.

An adjunct to such a form of religious faith is a refusal to countenance scientific discovery if it appears inconvenient to an aspect of organised religion. After what happened to Galileo, it is easy to see why some later scientists tended to think religious belief and scientific endeavour could not co-exist.

Yet for most people of faith, religious belief is quintessentially about truth. So, science and faith, reason and faith should never be seen as opposites but as bedfellows. Sometimes, as with those whose faith led them to denounce the false science around race and genetics, it is faith that can lead science. The seeking after knowledge is a powerful motor force in many faiths, not least in the Qur'an where

people are exhorted to acquire knowledge, something which for centuries put Islamic countries not Christian ones, at the forefront of scientific advance.

Now, you may say, this is all very well. If you are of religious faith, all this may be of interest to you. But if not: Why should I care? So, there are these competing strands of vision about faith in the modern world. So what? Why does it matter in the world beyond the faith communities? The answer is this.

Accept the premise that faith is not in decline. It isn't disappearing inevitably under the weight of scientific and technological progress. It is still here with us, not just surviving but thriving.

In an era of globalisation, of political interdependence, where the world is ever more swiftly opening up and the cliché about a global community becomes an economic, political and often social reality; in this new world, how religious faith develops will have a profound impact.

The forces shaping the world at this moment are so strong and all tend in one direction. They are opening the world up. I sometimes say to people that in modern politics, the dividing line is often less between traditional left vs. right; but more about open vs. closed.

Mass migration is changing communities, even

countries. People communicate ideas and images instantly around the world, creating immediate political and ideological movements in a ferment of quickly devoured information. Economically the world system is ever more dependent on confidence, robust when things seem good, extraordinarily brittle when confidence dips. The world is interdependent today, economically, politically, even to a degree ideologically.

The divide, then, is between those who see this as positive - the opening up offering opportunity; and those who see it as threatening and wish to close it back down.

As you can see from the Presidential race in the U.S., there are new questions that cross traditional Party lines: free trade vs. protection; engagement in foreign policy or isolationism; supporting immigration or opposing it. In these, the issue is less left vs right but open vs closed. And they all derive from a fear that globalisation is throwing people, cultures, countries together but with no common sense of values or understanding of each other. The landmark Gallup Poll, being taken world-wide, demonstrates the huge centrality of inter-cultural sensitivity as to how globalisation is perceived.

It is in this context that the role of faith is especially important, not least because most religions were global, even before political and economic systems

were. If people of faith reach out to one another, learn to co-exist, believe in respecting 'the other' they can play an important part in reducing fear and tension, being proud of their own distinctive religious, and often cultural identity, but open and in amity towards those of a different religion. Alternatively, religious faith could be used to bolster, to promote, to intensify the very clash of civilisations we seek to avoid.

This is why it matters to those of different faiths and those of none, to have a powerful inter-faith encounter, precisely because such an encounter symbolises and enacts a world of co-existence not exclusion.

I would widen the argument still further. Faiths can transform and humanise the impersonal forces of globalisation, and shape the values of the changing set of economic and power relationships of the early 21st C. This is one of the issues I'll explore in a Faith and Globalisation course which I am starting with Yale University later this year.

Since leaving office, I have understood better a phenomenon I understood only partially as P.M. For obvious reasons, I was focused on the threat of global terrorism and the struggle against it. But it was not the only phenomenon of recent times.

The other – which I see so plainly now – is that the centre of gravity, economically and politically, is shifting East. And it is shifting fast. China has gone

from a standing start to arguably the most powerful nation on the continent of Africa. China and India together, will industrialise the bulk of their populations, presently employed in subsistence agriculture, probably within 2 decades. Because of the size of their populations, understand what this means: it is an industrialisation roughly 3 times that of the U.S.A. and at roughly 5 times the speed. Yes the mind boggles.

It is one reason why a sensible long-term partnership with China, and of course with India, is of vital strategic importance to us.

Take the major sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf States and you will find a sum of money equal to a sum several times the funding of the World Bank and IMF combined.

All this, without even detailing the potential power of Indonesia, a country now growing at 6% per annum and of a size four times that of the UK; Vietnam, the size of Germany and moving rapidly up the economic league table or Thailand, Malaysia and several others.

For the first time in centuries the West will have to come to terms with the seismic change happening about it. The East is rising. At the least it will demand parity with the West. And perhaps more.

But what values will this daunting new world use to guide it?

I believe, in this era of rapid globalisation, where power is shifting away from its traditional centre in the west, the world will be immeasurably poorer, more dangerous, more fragile and above all, more aimless - I mean without the necessary sense of purpose to help guide its journey- if it is without a strong spiritual dimension. Today, precisely because all the fixed points of reference seem unfixed and constantly in flux; today is more than ever, when we need to discover and re-discover our essential humility before God, our dignity as found in our lives being placed at the service of the Source and Goal of everything. I can't prove that religious faith offers something more than humanism. But I believe profoundly that it does. And since religious faith has such a strong historical and cultural influence on both East and West, it can help unify around common values what otherwise might be a battle for domination.

In her remarkable book 'The Great Transformation' Karen Armstrong traces the evolution of religious thought from the earliest times, both East and West, when religion did indeed seem often cruel, unforgiving and irrational, to the modern times in which the faiths share many common values and much common purpose.

The Foundation that I am starting is an attempt to do something a little different from the many excellent inter-faith bodies and organisations that already exist and many of which are represented here today.

Indeed, I want to pay warm tribute this country's pioneering record of inter faith relations and dialogue. I am proud that the Council of Christians and Jews was set up as long ago as 1942, and that many other bodies have since then come into existence, such as the Inter Faith Network, the Three Faiths Forum and others too numerous to mention. But my Foundation will attempt to complement their work, not duplicate it.

I am not a religious leader. Actually today I am no longer a political leader. I am aware of all the jibes and ridicule that attends anyone in politics speaking about religion. I make no claims to moral superiority. Quite the opposite.

But I am passionate about the importance of faith to our modern world and about the need for people of faith to reach out to one another.

The foundation will concentrate on certain key specifics. The first will be to help the different faith organisations to work together in furtherance of the Millennium Development Goals, which I helped advocate as PM and which are, in many ways the litmus test of the world's values. Faith groups do great individual work in this area. But they could do even more, if helped also to combine together. The MDGs are stark in their ambition and necessity. We are falling short as a world in meeting them. It would be a great example of faith in action to try to bridge the gap and awaken the world's conscience.

The second will be to produce high quality material – books, websites, every means of communication – to educate people better about the different faiths, what they truly believe not what we often mistakenly think they believe.

The foundation will concentrate, in the immediate term, on the six main faiths, the Abrahamic three and Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. But, though the foundation will expressly not be confined to the Abrahamic faiths, we will partner existing organisations that promote better understanding and co-existence between Christians, Muslims and Jews, notably in The Coexist Foundation’s vision of creating Abraham House here in London, where people of those faiths but also others, can encounter some of their traditions, explore their roots and, without glossing over their differences, discover what they share.

We will also help partner those within any of the faiths who stand up for peaceful co-existence and reject the extremist and divisive notion that faiths are in fundamental struggle against each other.

But in conclusion, I freely confess there is a broader objective.

The Foundation will expressly not be about chucking faith into a doctrinal melting pot. It is not about losing our own distinctive faith. It is about learning about, living and working with others of a different

faith. But it will also be concerned with promoting the idea of faith itself as something dynamic, modern and full of present relevance.

For religion to be a positive force for good, it must be rescued not simply from extremism –faith as a means of exclusion; but also from irrelevance - an interesting part of our history but not of our future. Too many people see religious faith as represented in stark dogmatism and empty ritualism. Faith is reduced to a system of strange convictions and actions that, to some, can appear far removed from the necessities and anxieties of ordinary life. It is this face that gives militant secularism an easy target. It mocks certain of the practices and traditions of organised religion which they define as ‘faith’. ‘Faith’ is to be found in the cassocks and the gowns and the rituals.

Reading the Dawkins book – The God Delusion – I am struck by how much the militant secularist and the religious extremist need each other. The God Delusion is a brilliant polemic but rests entirely – as does the more reasonable The Blind Watchmaker - on the view that those who believe in God believe in Him as a means of exclusion, as a frightening, irrational piece of superstition and mumbo-jumbo which then justifies the unjustifiable.

To be fair, people of this view do respect some of what is done in the name of faith, but believe it could be done and done better in the name of humanity, without the encumbrance of faith. I agree that you

don't need to be religious to be good – a true statement but which itself often then becomes one that can exclude religion from the idea of doing good – a very different proposition.

For the less militant secularist the notion of faith is at best harmless but misguided; and the role of religion at best expressed in beautiful churches, in religiously inspired art, in all the history and culture of countries when religion was dominant. This aesthetic or historical view of religious faith sees faith as an interesting part of tradition but with little or no contemporary relevance.

Again, I agree : belief in God can be about superstition, or fear – how many of us make promises to God when frightened, only to forget them when the danger passes? But if that were all faith was, it would never have lasted or deserved to.

So why despite it all does faith persist, why has it not disappeared with the advent of modern science and technology; why despite all the aspects of organised religion and unorganised religion that put people off, does religious faith continue to be a focal point for millions as to how they lead their lives? Why does it continue to inspire works of supreme self-sacrifice and selflessness?

This is because, along with all the doctrine and theology, the practice and the ritual, at the core faith represents a profound yearning within the human spirit. Indeed it is why we talk about the spirit.

Faith answers to the basic, irrepressible, irresistible human wish for spiritual betterment, to do good, to think and act beyond the limitations of selfish human desires. More than that, it is rooted in a belief that the impulse to do good or try to, is not utilitarian or self-interested but is about putting aside self, in being aware of something bigger, more central, more essential to our human condition than self. In this, the 'other' is not to be rejected still less excluded, but embraced as more important than you or me. And people of faith believe we are driven or guided to this end. For those who feel in this way, God is not some wise Old Man up in the sky, but the true source of life. God is selfless love, merciful and an infinite dispenser of Grace.

Organised religion seen in this light, is, then, not about arid ritual but a collective demonstration of faith, a coming together of people who believe in the power of God's mercy and love, who believe that it is of universal application, and who in coming together symbolise that communion with God and with fellow human beings.

In this way, Faith guides our lives, knowing our weakness and granting us strength.

Faith corrects, in a necessary and vital way, the tendency humankind has to relativism. It says there are absolutes – like the inalienable worth and dignity

of every human being – that can never be sacrificed. It gives true moral fibre. We err, we do wrong, we sin but at least we know it and we feel the compunction to do better and the need to seek God's forgiveness.

Faith is a living and growing belief, not stuck in one time in history, but moving with time, with reason, with knowledge, informed by scientific and technological discovery not in antithesis to it, as well as directing those discoveries toward humane ends.

Faith is not something separate from our reason, still less from society around us, but integral to it, giving the use of reason a purpose and society a soul, and human beings a sense of the divine.

This is the life purpose that cannot be found in constitutions, speeches, stirring art or rhetoric. It is a purpose uniquely centred around kneeling before God.

For those of us of faith, this is what it means. And whilst we should not foist our belief on others, we should not be ashamed either to assert it or be proud of it. For us, faith is not an historical relic but a guide for humanity on its path to the future. A faithless world is not one in which we want ourselves and our children to live.

If people of different faiths can co-exist happily, in mutual respect and solidarity, so can our world. And if faith takes its proper place in our lives, then we can

**live with a purpose beyond ourselves alone,
supporting humanity on its journey to fulfilment.**