"Does spirituality have a place in the public domain?": an address to the Institute for Spiritual Studies

by Peter Hollingworth

The following is the text of an address given by the Right Revd Dr Peter Hollingworth AC OBE to the Institute for Spiritual Studies in Melbourne on Wednesday 27th April 2005.

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There is a widely held political dictum that in the modern, secular, pluralist democratic state, there can be no place for the influence of spirituality or religion on the part of the churches or other religious bodies.

In beginning this address, it is important for me to offer some general definitions of what I mean about some of the key words in that first paragraph.

Firstly, *spirituality*. This refers to spiritual mindedness, devotion to the things of the spirit, the disciplined approach to one's spiritual life, the opposition to materialism, secularism and hedonism, obedience to the laws of the church or other religious bodies. It is also related to spiritual formation, which is the theme of the Christian's life after the Baptism. It is to do with justification and the process of sanctification, involving the imitation of Christ.

There are two strands to spirituality which must be held in balance, although this is not always the case. The first is devotion to the justice of God, implying a public dimension to one's spiritual life and the second is to do with the evangelical pursuit of spiritual life and piety, implying the personal and individual aspect of spirituality. These two perspectives enjoin us to become more like Christ in our personal lives and to live this out in society, pursuing a world which bears the marks to the Kingdom of God.

Religion – there are only five references to the word in the New Testament and they are mostly to describe what religion is not. We may draw from the Latin however, noting that 'religio' means to bind. Religion is about the ordering, disciplining and containing, the regulation governance and codification of spiritual insights. Religion provides the structure for spiritual life, both corporate and individual. It interprets the scriptures, lays down spiritual and moral laws, and formulates doctrine and commandment, involving matters of faith and conduct. The task of religion is to edify and instruct its followers, offering guidance to them as they live out their lives on earth.

Turning now from the sacred to the secular, so to speak, we need to consider three more terms. By *'modern'*, I refer to the epoch of modernity which covers roughly the last 500 years in Western Europe. It refers to that period known as the Enlightenment which commenced at the end of the 15th century and developed a distinctive philosophical and aesthetic tradition. The Enlightenment placed humanity in the centre of the equation, believing that human beings were capable of knowledge, reason and achievement beyond previous imagining. This corresponds with the dawning of science and human enquiry into the nature of the universe and is illustrated in the Copernican and Newtonian revolutions in scientific thought. This focus upon reason, scientific enquiry and humanism has been the dominant thrust over most of that period into the late 20th century, when much of that thinking has been challenged by another movement called 'postmodernism'.

The second is the term *'secular'* which is a word often misunderstood. It refers to the affairs of this world as having their own integrity without reference to the divine, although it is not in its nature necessary anti-religious. Its integrity is based upon having its own laws,

precepts, ordinances and conventions. As the modern world has witnessed an extraordinary explosion of human knowledge, this has led to new processes which the sociologists describe in terms such as 'differentiation of function', 'specialisation', 'professionalisation' and the division of society into distinct sectors for administrative purposes. These are natural outcomes which arise when the earlier undifferentiated world is unable to contain new areas of knowledge.

Although this is a necessary and understandable development, one of the outcomes for the churches is that religion has been forced into a particular sector or category, where religious bodies are expected to exercise "the religious function", but with the term being defined in a limited and restricted way. The idea of a narrowly prescribed role for religion comes into being as a result of the eighteenth century dictum of "the separation of church and state", which is most clearly articulated in countries like the United States. However you will not find that phrase referred to in the Australian Constitution nor, I believe, in the United States Constitution. It is a dictum which has been elevated to the status of an unchallenged political doctrine by those secularists wishing to contain the power and influence of the church.

It is important in conclusion to differentiate between "secularisation" which refers to a long historical and sociological process and "secularism" which is a form of closed anti-religious ideology. The first does not necessarily imply the presence of the latter, although the two are invariably confused.

The third term is "*democratic*"; this is the term with which we are all very familiar and it applies to notions such as the sovereignty of the individual, elected representation, the consent of the governed, the freedom of choice, assembly, speech and, by extension, the media. It implies majority rule and the accountability of governments to their citizenry. The rule of the law, which is a cornerstone of democracy also has the task of protecting citizens from undue control and exploitation by powerful interests which may seek to limit their freedom.

What all this amounts to is that over the course of human history there has been a long and steady shift from ancient to modern societies, in the sense that a predominantly sacred world, where religious faith is pervasive and dominant, gradually changes into a secular, differentiated world where in the West at least, spiritual and religious influence and acts have gradually been eased out of the public domain. The notion of 'coming of age' of humanity has tended to imply that religion is no longer warranted in the affairs of the state. Conversely, religion is depicted and caricatured as superstitious, authoritarian, and divisive, as a basis for the claim that religion needs to be restricted . So the doctrine of 'separation' has been the mechanism by which this has been procured. The other way this process can be described is that of "desacralization", a term which also describes the process but from the opposite perspective to secularisation.

Looking back at history, there is a good reason for this to have happened in the wake of the "wars of religion" in the 16th and 17th centuries. At the end of that period, political philosophers who were developing the notion of democracy judged that the best thing to do about religion was to keep it out of the affairs of state, restricting it to the realm of the private and the spiritual. In this way its dominance over political affairs could be contained.

There are of course risks in making sweeping generalisations, so it will be helpful if we turn to Richard Niebuhr and a significant little book he wrote in 1951 called Christ and Culture. These five responses about the relationship between church and state and Christ and culture are all responses which were appropriate to each age or epoch in Christian history and therefore are worth elaborating.

1. The Early Church – Christ stands over against the world as there is an inherent conflict of values between them.
2. Thomas Aquinas – Christ is the fulfiller of mankind's cultural aspirations, with the churches' task being to restore the institutions of the true society.
3. St. Augustine – Christ is the transformer of culture, with the churches' task being the conversion of man in his society.
4. Martin Luther – Christ is the hope of the world who stands beyond history, with Christians accepting the paradox of trying to be faithful to both.

5. 19th Century Liberalism – Christ is the climax of the world's cultural heritage, with Christianity an integral part of that heritage.

Where does Australian society in the 21st century fit within this schema? Australia, along with most Eastern European states, has for some time experienced a situation where the churches have had a diminished influence on the wider society. The churches have to work with fewer resources and there is less public confidence in the clergy, who have always had a bad press. Furthermore, they have limited expertise effectively to engage in wider fields involving highly technical and expert issues. Generally speaking it must be said that even when they do stand together, the churches are a shrinking part of a wider society which is increasingly pluralist in its nature and where other pressure groups seek to counter that limited influence for their own particular purposes.

The public forum has been therefore well and truly swept and garnished of significant religious influence and a values vacuum now remains at the heart of public life. There are no longer institutions with an accepted mandate to shape and inform public ethical standards, with serious consequences for the future of a "civil society". This loss of religious influence in Western society is something that deeply troubled Pope John Paul II and continues to trouble his successor Pope Benedict XVI. This is a matter which we should follow with great interest as he seeks to address the issue of secularism within the roots of his own European tradition.

This gloomy assessment should be qualified with a small exception. The interest of younger generations in Eastern religion and mysticism, coupled with various forms of meditation testifies to the fact that spirituality in one form or another still has meaning in many peoples' lives as they seek meaning and direction for themselves.

This has led to the often expressed dictum, "spirituality is acceptable today, but not religion". Consequently, the church is still excluded by being falsely contrasted with spirituality. Here I offer a lovely example from an experience of interfaith dialogue held in St Paul's Cathedral here in Melbourne some years ago between Buddhist teacher Soygal Rinpoche, a Tibetan master living in France, and me. In the presence of a full cathedral (mostly Buddhist) one of them asked the question "do you agree that humanity needs spirituality but that it can do without religion?" The Rinpoche answered the question by picking up a glass of water and holding it up to the audience. He said: "Here is a glass with water in it, empty the water out and it disperses everywhere and is lost. The glass becomes empty and loses its essential purpose because it no longer contains the vital element of water. So it is with religion and spirituality because spirituality needs religion to secure it and hold it in place so that people can drink from its well springs." He concluded by saying, "you can't have the one without the other". I was very pleased that the question was directed to him as a Buddhist rather than me as a Christian because the audience would be much more likely to accept this truth from him!

We must resist calls for "separation" between church and state if that means further disengagement and disempowerment for the church. We can do no better than return to the dictum of Richard Hooker that our faith stands upon the tripod of scripture, tradition and reason, all of which have to come into play as we try to work out appropriate Christian positions in the public arena.

How then do we reclaim a place for the churches in today's society and in particular to participate in the public arena?

The first task has to be a theological one, involving the incarnational principle that the whole world is God's creation and in Christ it is the locus of His incarnation. As Christ is in the world, He can be discerned by those who believe in Him and who seek to participate in partnership with Him, working for its ultimate transformation. Thus, an incarnational theology has to be the anchor point in the journey of theological reconstruction today.

Then with regard to the role of Christians individually, we are to stand with our feet planted firmly in both worlds, as both religious

persons and as citizens, resisting the pressure to separate the two worlds and create a clear line of demarcation between things sacred and secular, church and state, private and public domains.

It will then be important to articulate how Christian values have been adapted and distilled into the Western cultural tradition without there being much awareness today of the source of those values. It may therefore be necessary for us to identify that source and to name it.

The churches have to provide the authoritative framework in which members can stand firm and here we can do no better than remember that we are called to act dynamically together to proclaim the reign of God in the world, acting as God's agents in the gradual process of its transformation. It is particularly important to remind ourselves all the time that this must be done in a spirit of humility and servanthood, for there can be no place for triumphalism in this day and age. This means we must be prepared to assert propositions which are of a "both/ and" nature, rather than "either/or" assertions. For example, it is a question of upholding spirituality and religion and not one or the other. We must resist calls for "separation" between church and state if that means further disengagement and disempowerment for the church. We can do no better than return to the dictum of Richard Hooker, that our faith stands upon the tripod of scripture, tradition and reason, all of which have to come into play as we try to work out appropriate Christian positions in the public arena.

In a publication entitled Faith in the public forum edited by Neil Brown and Robert Gascoigne in 1999 for the Australian Theological Forum, the editors called for the reaffirmation of faith as being not only private but also public and for that faith to find expression in the various public forums. Quite properly they argued this was not simply an issue for individual citizens or individual people of faith reaffirming their faith in public life, but it was also a crucial issue for the churches themselves.

They further asserted the need for a re-examination of the churches' position and to face four key issues if that re-entry into the public forum was to be successfully negotiated. This will certainly be a matter of continuing negotiation, because there are many forces in the public sphere that continue to regard religion warily and believe it has no place in public discourse and decision-making.

The first issue is a careful examination of the particular conditions governing social debate in their own situations. There is no "one size fits all" solution, due to the diversity of modern democracies. In considering the Western world, issues such as individualism, liberal democracy, economic rationalism, consumerism, the pursuit of individual rights and many other factors, present the churches with their own peculiar challenges and difficulties. Yet at the same time, these also provide windows of opportunity and shall be taken up.

At the present moment our society seems to consist of a pluralistic collection of "private" communities each pursuing their own interests and objectives. The greater aim must be to foster a sense of "moral community" in our society as a whole.

The second issue in relation to more secular states such as Australia, is that the churches must secure a well-argued philosophical position for themselves in the public arena. A sound philosophical approach, based upon the tenets of Christian social teaching provides a measure of objectivity and sound reason in the face of criticisms of "interference" in matters outside their direct concern. This will also involve staking out a claim against secularism and other lowest common denominator moralities, arguing that in a democracy all voices have the right to be heard and that no ideology under the guise of being "secular" should be allowed to have a monopoly over public life and discourse.

The third, is that a decision must be made as to which consideration should be introduced into the public debate in the given cultural circumstances of the time. It would seem that the dominant considerations being pressed by several religious groups at present are to do with the affirmation of life, the protection of

family life, opposition to abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research , together with opposition to gay marriages and similar practices regarded as destructive of the good ordering of society. Here, as elsewhere, the churches have to make the case that their moral teaching in these matters is required by their Christian beliefs and as necessary to living the good life.

Fourth, to develop a new style of argument in an approach to the public arena which is adapted to the audience being addressed. This involves some translation of traditional theological language into terms that modern secular people can understand.

To give a good illustration of this, a decade ago the New Zealand Heads of Churches offered five principles as the basis for faith in action in society. I use this as an example of how to distil gospel values into common language suitable for the public arena and as the basis of Christian social teaching that could also be accepted by all groups and elements in a secular society.

The five principles consist of:

1. Human dignity. This is first to acknowledge that human life is derived from God the creator. It is this gift which confers equal worth and value on all created beings, based not upon gender, race, age or economic status, but upon the gift of life itself which is to be valued and defended in all circumstances.
2. Community. It is here that the rights and mutual responsibilities of the members are to be exercised in relation to one another and not simply to self; recognising that the best values are those which have been learned in the context of close and loving relationships involving family, friends and wider community.
3. The common good. This implies the obligation to pursue not only one's own interest over others, but to seek the good of all people on the basis that if one person suffers or is diminished then all are diminished.
4. The value of work. This is an instrumental expression of human worth and respect, whereby people are able to participate in God's continuing creation, to support themselves and their families and to build up the social and economic order.
5. A preferential option for the poor. Given that many people live vulnerable lives and are excluded from mainstream opportunities, this must be a major concern of all social policies as they seek to empower and improve the capacity of poor and excluded people, in ways that will include them in the wider society as active participants.

As I have already noted, modern societies are marked by rapid change, fluid value systems and a widening gap between rich and poor. The public arena has gradually narrowed its scope and now focuses primarily on economic and bureaucratic concerns which intentionally or unintentionally seem to exclude other vital issues from public view.

In conclusion, it is the task of churches and their members individually and together vigorously to contest the gradual reduction of public life to purely economic and bureaucratic procedures, which are increasingly abstracted from those moral goods which make up our sense of human community. The "space" that exists in the public forum must allow for a proper dialogue about those goods which should make up our common good and human wellbeing. At the present moment our society seems to consist of a pluralistic collection of "private" communities each pursuing their own interests and objectives. The greater aim must be to foster a sense of "moral community" in our society as a whole.

Seen in this way, there is a real opportunity for the churches and indeed all religious institutions to make common cause together in the public arena, first of all by seeking to enrich it through a sense of solidarity and trust, through public worship, through the affirmation of axioms or self-evident truths, based on the loving purposes of God as Creator, Saviour and Spirit and on a sense of God's solidarity with suffering people.

Religion has always had a hard time in this country and no more so than at present. The easy thing is to cower in the face of these attacks and retreat into the realm of the private. The hard and the right thing is to harness our beliefs and re-engage as active, critical yet humble participants in the public forum where we have always had a legitimate right to be, standing alongside others of good will.