

**Faith in a Secular Age**  
**Good and bad religion and how to tell the difference<sup>1</sup>**

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Shortly after the title of this talk was announced at the summer session, someone approached me as we were leaving with the question ‘Is there such a thing as faith in our secular age?’ The question stayed with me for a long time. It’s a very loaded one and merits more than a straightforward ‘yes’ or ‘no’ by way of an answer. First, because it pertains to what is most secret and most private, in the mind and heart of the individual and, second because of the significance which the word ‘faith’ has acquired in recent years, a significance which is partly attributable to the confusion which exists between faith and belief.

Faith and the kind of belief which brooks little questioning are two quite different things, although they may have had their beginnings in the same place, at a particular stage of a person’s religious and psychological development.<sup>2</sup> Undeveloped belief may also be attributable to a deep seated need to be identified with, and belong to, a belief system, a set of beliefs which contain and protect the individual, or the group, from the intellectual challenges of the secular world. Faith and belief usually define a religious perspective, although belief only takes us to a certain point in terms of religious development. Only so much can be asked of it. If beliefs are pressed beyond what was asked of them in the early stages of a person’s emotional development, whether religious or not, they wear very thin and are ultimately no longer fit for purpose. Agnostics and atheists are therefore right to take issue with the kind of belief that is on the level of the tooth fairy or father Christmas, but they are quite wrong to confuse naïve belief with faith itself.

The other problem with stopping at belief is that, in a Christian context, its theological thinness allows it to be manipulated and used by individuals or groups with a particular power agenda. These agendas promote and feed a fundamentally negative mindset or insecure personality disorder in which the world, or secular society is perceived as the enemy, resulting in defensive attitudes which can take the form of aggressive evangelising tactics towards those outside a particular closed belief system. Outsiders need to be ‘converted’ or ‘conquered’. More dangerous still, in the context of Islam, are those who fuel alienation, especially in the young, with ideologies of hatred propounded in religious language. They too operate on a closed belief system basis which is often directly opposed to the teaching of their own sacred texts.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these scenarios is new or peculiar to any one religious context and both have their parallels in recent history. We have seen the devastation which religion,

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<sup>1</sup> A paper given to the Tintern Philosophy Circle, 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development was later replicated by James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, London: Harper and Row, 1981 and others. See, for example, Erik Erikson’s ‘Stages of Psychosocial Development’ and Lawrence Kohlberg who developed it further as ‘Stages of Moral Development’.

<sup>3</sup> Ed Husain describes his own journey into radicalisation, and subsequent return, with the disparity between the teaching of the Koran and the violence of Islamism being one of the key threads of his story. *The Islamist*, London: Penguin Books, 2007

put to the service of ideologies, is capable of wreaking on nations, communities and ethnic minorities in the relatively recent past. So it is not surprising that atheists will often attack religion because they are seeing it through the lens of ideology and, ultimately, as an operating base for the powerful. This more or less encapsulates what Karl Marx thought. For him, religion *was* ideology. When ideology presents itself as a distorted version of any one religion, it poisons the collective psyche. Good religion is purposed towards the highest good, the ultimate light, but this opens it to abuse and distortion, because goodness, like light, invites its opposite. That opposite can take the form of evil couched within even the best religion. The evils of religion take root in falsehood and complacency, in a refusal to re-examine a religion's values and teaching to the point that what was once deemed to be good and acceptable is now the opposite. Slavery is a case in point. And what once sufficed as a description of the way things are, now obscures the greater truths about existence, and hence about God, which have been revealed through the advances made in scientific knowledge. Evil and ignorance go hand in hand. So, if what we might loosely describe as resistance to the force of evil is to be made possible, we need to arrive at a better understanding of what religion is really about and how faith, as opposed to naïve belief, is a life giving energy and a force for the good. For this to be possible, there needs to be a willingness on the part of religious people, as well as those who do not think of themselves as religious, to take faith seriously in order to arrive at an understanding of religion as the purveyor of truth in its fullest sense, truth as that which conveys meaning and purpose to human existence and to the way things are – in other words, the whole created order. Philosophers, scientists and theologians are all trying to make sense of these questions. So we need to have some method for gauging the difference between good and bad religion and between faith and belief. What is it that shapes and gives meaning to the whole of existence and reveals its purpose? I want to say a few brief words about what I mean by religion before moving on to what I mean by faith – faith as it defines religion and the way religion in general is perceived today.

The root word for religion comes from the latin 'ligare', to bind together. *Re*-ligion is a 're-ligare' a re-binding of people together in God. In addition to this, and when it is at its best, religion holds, or binds, a faith community together on two levels, the concrete and the spiritual. On the first, it employs a framework, or context, which should be both supple and strong, and thereby capable of maintaining a religion's coherence while allowing it to move and shape itself around its times. Herein lies one of the sources of misunderstanding and paranoia which gives some religious people the idea that they are in danger of being taken over, or their religion compromised, by the times in which they happen to be living. In other words, by the secular. The structure, or institutional framework in which a religion functions is there to give shape and constantly re-examine faith, so that faith can continue to impart meaning, or truth, to the lives of the 'faithful'.

But the structure is only a framework. What ought to be going on inside that framework is more potent and significant. It is the life energy of the religion itself, the Spirit of God, which cannot be held or tied to purely human purposes, or within the confines of purely rational or propositional belief, especially when either one of these is a perversion of the religion itself. This structure is what Christians call the Church. The Church is the context in which faith works and develops on both a rational and a spiritual, or 'heart', level. Ideally, it is in the context of this framework or structure that the rational and the spiritual meet and generate what the bible calls Wisdom. Wisdom operates on both a private and a public level. It allows the individual and the worshipping community to test the faith they have received, as faith questions, and is questioned by, the rational. Religion, properly understood, therefore binds together the rational and the spiritual, and this is reflected in some measure in the shared life of a religious, or 'faith', community.

## Religion and Faith

Wisdom is also the energy of God's Spirit. It holds people of faith together in a state of continually moving and developing relatedness. For Christians, this relatedness derives from an understanding of the relatedness of a triune God, the Father, Son and Spirit, as a single life giving substance, or energy. The Orthodox Church, whose theology comes directly from that of the earliest teaching of Christianity, understands the life which imparts meaning to faith as deriving from within the life of God. As a result, meaning, or truth, is directly related to the life of the spirit rather than deriving from a purely rational acquiescence to a set of propositions.<sup>4</sup> The truth has to be known, in the way Job knows it, from experiencing God. Job's words, 'I *know* that my redeemer lives' is not an objective fact. It is a truth which he knows from experience. It is truth known in a relationship built on trust – one which allows him to take for granted the fact that he is loved in the midst of all that is happening to him.

Faith is trust before it is anything else.<sup>5</sup> But, as in human relationships, trust only comes from knowing a person well, so truth is also part of faith. It informs faith because it is discerned and experienced in the kind of relationship which reasons, questions and even resists, but which is motivated by a *heart-* felt longing to understand and be understood. For Jews and Christians this kind of understanding makes for coherent and good religion, as the psalms and much of the bible's Wisdom literature describe it. The understanding of which the psalmist speaks when he says 'Give me understanding that I might keep thy law' (Ps.119) is the wisdom which proceeds from God and leads *into* truth, rather than stopping short of truth. The human mind, the purely rational, can only take us so far. It is *experience* of God that leads the mind further into truth because God's love transcends the range and scope of human reason. He carries reason along with him, so to speak, in the movement of his own energy. So truth cannot be restricted to the purely propositional, any more than faith can be defined and contained by reason, a mistake easily made by those who misunderstand the nature of faith and therefore attack religion on a purely rational basis. This is where I should like to draw a provisional line between faith and religion as they are generally perceived in the context of the secular.

The word secular derives from the Latin *saeculorum*, meaning 'of the age'. But 'of the age' does not mean 'without faith'. Many people today who deny any formal religious affiliation, although they may acknowledge a Christian formation in childhood, still think of themselves as in some way 'spiritual', or seek some sort of spiritual dimension to their lives. For them, it is religion equated with 'faith' which is problematic. This suggests that it is religion which needs to be put to the test and not faith. What I have said so far suggests that faith begins with trusting in God's self revelation as unconditional love, so the truth defining substance of any religion worthy of the name will derive from a 'heart' felt need for its true source. Religion which lacks the substance of what it is meant to signify, which is love, is not good religion. Therefore it cannot be true in the fullest sense. The mark of true religion is to be seen in the way faith communities and individuals 'work' the unconditional love of God in their lives, in the kind of persons they are and in communities given over to the service of the least important, the marginalised and the poor - and by poor I do not only mean the materially poor. It is possible to be rich and successful but spiritually bankrupt. So the test of good religion will also lie in the way it serves those whose inner life is sated with the material,

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990, p.14

<sup>5</sup> Devin Vanhoozer and Martin Warner (eds.), *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Religion: Reason, Meaning and Experience*, London: Ashgate, 2007, p.16

starved of human love and without real purpose. The mark of true and good religion lies therefore in love given to the task of living from within the truth its adherents profess. It demands the unconditional giving of everything that a person has of themselves in any and all situations. This outworking of faith as unconditional love, and thereby manifestation of truth, also creates the bridge needed to make sense of 'knowing' in both religious and philosophical terms.

Some philosophers have sought to detach knowledge pertaining to that dimension which is loosely defined as the 'spiritual' from what is 'real' or knowable, thereby seeming to free the rational from the constraints perceived in 'God talk'. While this can be helpful as a way of ultimately bridging the rational with the intuitive, or with the experience of God, it does not always shed much light on the kind of questions which many people are asking with regard to faith and religion. As far as religion is concerned, they will have been put off any serious engagement with questions relating to faith and God because they resent and distrust the doctrinal absolutes which appear to fence God in and deny them access to him. The problem lies in the assumptions about the way doctrine is to be received and what it is for. They see these doctrinal absolutes as something to which a person signs up, or which confers identity and a sense of belonging.

All such thinking ignores the fact that doctrine, properly understood, exists to free the human mind and imagination *into* the kind of reality in which truth is experienced rather than to constrain it in propositions to which assent is given or withheld. The problem of non-differentiation between assenting to and receiving truth, as it is presented doctrinally, goes back to the Reformation, and before that to Aquinas and Augustine, albeit in different ways. For Christians, the paradigm of truth was defined, depending on the times you were living in, in the primacy of scripture, the work of grace and the salvation of the individual, or by the nature of religious authority and the centrality of the Church. All of these perceived restraints and conditions have not only divided the Church, but have helped to create a separation of mind and heart which is a barrier to good religious thinking. This is equally problematic for those who may not think of themselves as 'religious' but would still like to engage with questions of faith.

### **The Idea of Faith**

Faith manifests itself from within people. They may not always describe themselves as people of faith, but 'the light of God within', recognised in different ways by at least five of the world's main religions, is revealed in them in the love and energy they give to life in the here and now, whether or not they are conscious of it. Put theologically, this means that the dynamic energy of Love itself is at work as *ruah*, the Hebraic biblical word which also signifies Wisdom. It is the energy of the Spirit of God continually moving humanity and the created order into an ever evolving revelation of reality – the reality of God's own life. Once again, it is the dynamic nature of this moving and generative force which is so important to faith and to the way in which religion is practiced. Where faith, leading into a deeper and transformative truth, gets separated from the generative force of love, which is that of God's own Spirit, religion ceases to embody that movement. Its life decelerates and ultimately stops. As a result, it ceases to connect with life as it is really experienced by millions of people at any one time in history, or with the moral and intellectual challenges which they face.

Of equal importance for us in the affluent West is the way this separation of faith from the love of God has meant that formal, or institutionalised, religion is less and less

equipped to feed the spiritual hunger which people are experiencing in these times of rampant materialism. Institutionalised, or static, religion is no longer able to nourish the human person who has been reduced to the status of consumer. We see this happening in churches which function as religious commodity providers to particular consumer groups. (Unfortunately, a more detailed discussion of this worrying phenomenon would take us way beyond the time limit set for this talk).

Part of the difficulty which a consumer mentality raises for people seeking a truthful relationship with God lies in the fact that all of us, whether or not we think of ourselves as religious, have lost sight of the real meaning of freedom. The consumer is no longer a person in the fullest sense because, in the unconscious, or perhaps conscious, mind of those who present them with so called 'choices' they are not free to discern what is for their real good – in other words what they really need and want. The consumer is a malleable tool, useful as long as it serves the provider's own interests, and, as a result, beneath contempt. We only have to think back on some of the email exchanges which took place between bankers during last year's (2012) derivatives débacle in which clients were referred to as 'muppets'.

But the real danger that lies hidden beneath the 'bling' of consumerism is the complete stagnation of the collective spiritual life. This is the life of the spirit, of *ruah*, which enables real social transformation. As I suggested earlier, it does so through the kind of relatedness which is at work within the life and love of God and which constantly returns us to truth. Faith and love brace one another and turn on the fulcrum of truth. Where there is faith and good religion human beings can begin to be truthful with one another and to reconnect with what makes them fully human. Similarly, where there is transformation, individuals and interest groups, (or power bases, including those within the Church itself) now have the means to become a composite part of the re-forming of humanity, as they acknowledge a shared and far more truthful need for one another. We get a glimpse of this transformative truth at work in tentative moves towards peace and reconciliation on the world stage today.

Transformation embodies both truth and reconciliation. It is the substance of all good religion because good religion binds human beings together as persons by generating trust. For trust to be possible, good religion requires a concrete refusal of the politics, social mores and 'life-styles' which are against what is truly conducive to life itself, life being more than a matter of 'style' defined by so called consumer 'choice'. In the economics of love, and in good religion, there exists a huge difference between a conscious will for the good of the person, involving the acceptance of constraints and even of sacrifice, and the kind of open ended choice promised by advertising and by certain kinds of politicians. Freedom of choice, as defined by consumerism, is self contradictory because where there is no trust, and no respect for the human person, there is no freedom. This raises a question for theologians as well as for philosophers, insofar as it pertains to genuine freedom of will in the matter of consumer choice. Both involve the kind of freedom which is un-coerced and unaffected by 'externals'. So, does the free will of the consumer represent a conscious, rational decision regarding the course of action which is in the best possible interest of the human person? People of *faith* will want to hold governments and industry accountable for their own willed decisions, insofar as they influence choice, to the extent that these decisions do, or do not, concur with the purposes of a loving God.

When a decision of the will concurs with the purposes of a loving God, it is both intuitive (in other words of the spirit) and creative. It discerns the truth in any one course of action and acts on it, sometimes in sudden and surprising ways. If, as we hope, the President

of Iran is acting in good faith when he declares his country's good will towards the West, the first time such a rapprochement has been attempted in 35 years, we must suppose that he sees that such an attitude is for the good of the people he represents. We hope that it will prove to be a willed action done in love proceeding from faith. In the UK and parts of Europe we are beginning to see its opposite in the politics of fear which are germinating hatred through the voices of small but vocal minority parties. One of them, the Golden Dawn Party, is openly supported by the Greek Orthodox Church. As in Germany in the 1930's this suggests a Church which is in danger of losing its faith – in being the front for an entirely loveless kind of religion, a religion which has adopted the mantle of a particularly vicious form of secularism from which the kind of God I have been describing is entirely absent. It is not good religion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the face of the evils of Nazi religion taught 'religionless Christianity', a faith freed from the corruption of the National Church. His were desperate times. Ours may become so as well if faith continues to be used and abused in the service of ideological or material agendas which diminish the human person and deny life, including those agendas which emerge within religion itself. The hallmark of idolatry has always been that whatever it is that is idolised is in fact lifeless and life denying.

Good religion requires a language which lends itself to continual interpretation and thus to an evolving and transformative truth which gives life. Good religion calls for a language which allows truth to emerge from what is understood at that deeper intuited level in which truth is revealed, or 'recognised'. Artists, poets, writers and composers of music, speak and understand this language. They reveal truth in an intuited way, as what James Joyce calls an 'epiphany'. An epiphany is a truth manifested or revealed by the artist or writer that a person has always known about themselves, or about the human condition, but which they only recognise in the moment. The essence of truth is what theologians are trying to understand and define and which people who may not think of themselves as 'religious' may have already grasped, although they may not realise it. Such is the wisdom of the foolish, to allude to one of St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It is the experience of a reality which is greater, and yet infinitely smaller, than any one theological or philosophical concept of God.

So doing theology, and pursuing wisdom, involves risking an encounter with truth in an altogether different dimension. If pursued for long enough, it will change the way a person thinks about everything, so it is not surprising that, unlike Moses, some theologians and philosophers of religion have taken the long way round the mountain, rather than climb to the top and come face to face with the ineffable God. Some would prefer to avoid the encounter altogether. One way of avoiding God is to deny, or partly deny, his existence, whatever we take 'existence' to mean, and this brings us back to the question of defining a reality which is outside human consciousness. Is faith a matter of 'believing' in an imagined God-type persona? or is it a lived experience of dynamic and re-creative truth which permeates and ultimately reshapes what we think of as consciousness? Something to discuss later, perhaps. Another is to put the whole subject of truth as it pertains to an ineffable God into a box marked 'superstition'. But this begs a further set of questions, as it gives rise to further confusion between the idea of myth as fairy tale, myth as allegory or explanation and myth as falsehood *tout court*. Something has to be made of God in all of these categories if we are really going to talk about faith as the outworking of the truth of any one religion. Sooner or later questions of belief in some higher power, or of life after death, or of an ordered purpose to human existence, and that of all physical phenomena are bound to arise. More importantly, however, is the emergence of a vital connection, which is also a *disconnection*, between the kind of knowledge relating to fact, empirical evidence and propositional truth, and the kind of knowledge which is felt, or heard, as faith in the purpose of a loving God for the ultimate good of creation. It is neither fatalism or superstition but a challenge to all to work within his

ongoing creative purpose and, most importantly, to *trust* in that purpose. This is where mind and heart need to work together in what I call ‘heart thinking’.

### **Heart Thinking**

Central to Eastern Orthodox teaching is the idea that it is impossible to do theology as a purely rational discipline. A theologian must be someone who experiences God by knowing him, as one might know a revered teacher who has become an intimate friend, and as one ought to know oneself. Theologians have to learn wisdom not through the process of deduction, the sifting and sorting of first principles, but by a gradual letting go of all principles, a knowing that is rooted and grown from within. Rowan Williams describes this way of knowing as ‘not a subject’s conceptual grasp of an object, (but) a sharing what God is, sharing God’s “experience”’.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of this kind is a sensing of the truth, the truth revealed as an ‘epiphany’ of the kind I described earlier. Epiphany consists in recognising what is hidden, and at the same time already known, but which is now made coherent or ‘real’ with the help of deductive reasoning. This is how the Christian creeds came to be written and we should continue to engage with them at this head-heart level. The same principle holds for the scriptures and writings of the three Abrahamic faiths, and possibly of others. All of them exist for the ongoing exploration of truth. But the kind of truth I am talking about is only fully realised when it is shared with others in some kind of conversation, not always involving words, but nevertheless in a dialogue which leads all those involved into a shared recognition of something already known, something which fills the emptiness which separates them, and which makes them strangers to one another. It is in this emptiness that we discern truth, the emptiness in which God is revealed and in which we begin to know ourselves, and so understand others.

The emptiness is also where philosophy and theology meet and where good religion begins. Philosophers and theologians, as well as artists and perhaps some mathematicians, are seeking to make this connection by bringing together ideas of truth, both as meaning and as the product of reasoned deduction. All may sense that, taken alone, neither intuited meaning or reasoned deduction leading to definable truth, has really proved satisfactory as food for the soul or even as grist for the mill of rational thinking. Coleridge wrestled with this dichotomy and spoke of the ‘imagination’ as a way of lifting the mind, the rational and the empirical onto a higher plain from where truth might be ‘discerned’. Working in the immediate aftermath of the industrial revolution, as the wave of Enlightenment thinking was just beginning to break, he offered a kind of bridge, or ‘staircase’ from the secular and material to the divine through poetry which spoke of God.

It would not be the last time that the Romanticism which we associate with Coleridge would reappear as an attempt to reach out for things spiritual in a spiritually bereft society. Perhaps the most recent manifestation of what we might call a Romantic movement came in the 1960’s and early 70’s, in which a generation who had been brought up in a climate of post war austerity, both economic and moral, was challenging patriotism and traditional values. Conformity and unquestioning obedience to governments, especially in regard to the politics of conflict, was no longer to be taken for granted, as anyone who marched in Central Park against the Viet Nam War and the draft to the chant of “Hell no, we won’t go” will remember. The theological climate, if we can call it that, corresponded to that of Coleridge in which the Age of Reason called to account the constitutory elements, the three key systems,

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams *The Wound of Knowledge* p.14

for holding society together, the political, intellectual and religious. Of these, the religious as it was tied to the philosophical is of special interest to us this evening.

Both in Coleridge's time and later in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of God could be reasoned from the evidence of the natural world as a sort of determining force. By the 1960's human beings were free to exercise choice in matters of belief and to decide for themselves whether the idea of God, or any kind of formal religion was capable of being a bearer of meaning. Your truth may have been conditioned by the stories you had been brought up with but their attendant mores were in general felt to be no longer fit for purpose. The stories, and Christianity specifically, no longer conveyed meaning, partly because it was seen to inhibit enjoyment by restraining the freedom of the individual. Nevertheless, the disappearance of these formative stories left a gap which needed to be filled by something, so 'spirituality' reappeared— in various manifestations, sometimes involving the use of hallucinogenics. Through all this apparent decadence there was a sense of desire for something, or someone, who could supply what traditional Christianity could not. The more mystical Eastern religions began to grow in popularity, as did the Pentecostal and charismatic Christian house churches. There was a sense of needing to release religion and belief from the straight jackets of doctrine and arcane liturgy, into something more congenial and aesthetically appealing. At the same time, the senses, now freed from traditional morality, were looking to connect with the life of the spirit, although it was never entirely clear what the spirit was or what that life might entail.

All of this helped to bring the idea of religion itself back to a different kind of unknowing insofar as anything which might concern belief could also be 'not known'. It also gave permission for agnosticism to become once again recognisable and acceptable currency when it came to God talk. The word agnostic was coined in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century but derived originally from the Enlightenment in which all God talk was to be subjected to reason. The 'not knowing' of the spirit, what is also called the apophatic, would have been understood only by those familiar with the teaching of the Orthodox Fathers, in particular that of Gregory of Nyssa and the work of one or other of two men who shared the name Dionysius, but who were working several centuries apart. Despite the confusion and the ecclesiastical politics which surrounded the works of the last two, all three of these early thinkers contributed to shaping theological ideas into words by bringing together the thinking process with what is to be intuited from the heart, so making make faith itself more comprehensible to those who were prepared to relinquish certain habits of mind – to heed the *way* in which they thought about God, rather than *what* they thought.

Their thinking invites all of us, whether or not we think of ourselves as people of faith, to engage with a different kind of language, a language of the heart shaped by the will to understand where another person's truth is lodged and by a desire to connect with it. The work of philosophers and of theologians consists in helping people to understand the truth language of others, so that, in the case of religious faith, this truth can be experienced at a deeper level than that of the purely rational. In a world which sees religion used as a weapon for maintaining power over people, most notably women, and for the triumph of one ideology over another, philosophers need to be thinking *with* theologians. Each must trust the other. For theologians and people of faith, this is not a matter of giving in to secularism, as some religious people suppose, or of religion dictating terms to a secular society, as it is frequently accused of doing by some of its more shrill detractors. Neither is truth-sharing between the secular and people of faith a matter of the secular inheriting or borrowing the best which religion has to offer and throwing out what is perceived as irrelevant or no longer fit for



purpose.<sup>7</sup> It is about arriving together at the kind of understanding of truth which brings about a shared will for peace, and for the preservation of the earth itself, across the boundaries which exist between the religious and the secular thought world. Such an understanding comes from a shared experience of the ultimate source of truth, that which holds all truths together in love.

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<sup>7</sup> Dominic Erdozain 'Christianity without the Mumbo-Jumbo: The making of a secular outlook in modern Britain' Paper delivered at Tyndale House, Cambridge, 24 April 2009, as part of a day conference on 'Responding to Secularism: Christian Witness in a Dogmatic Public Culture', co-sponsored by the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics and the Gospel and Our Culture Network.