

## **Breaking Faith With Britain**

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The rapid fragmentation of society, the emergence of isolated communities with only tenuous links to their wider context, and the impact of home-grown terrorism have all led even hard-bitten, pragmatist politicians to ask questions about “Britishness”: what is at the core of British identity; how can it be reclaimed, passed on and owned by more and more people?

The answers to these questions cannot be only in terms of the “thin” values, such as respect, tolerance and good behaviour, which are usually served up by those scratching around for something to say. In fact, the answer can only be given after rigorous investigation into the history of nationhood and of the institutions, laws, customs and values which have arisen to sustain and to enhance it. In this connection, as with the rest of Europe, it cannot be gainsaid that the very idea of a unified people under God living in a “golden chain” of social harmony has everything to do with the arrival and flourishing of Christianity in these parts. It is impossible to imagine how else a rabble of mutually hostile tribes, fiefdoms and kingdoms could have become a nation conscious of its identity and able to make an impact on the world. In England, particularly, this consciousness goes back a long way and is reflected, for example, in a national network of care for the poor that was locally based in the parishes and was already in place in the 16th century.

In some ways, I am the least qualified to write about such matters. There have been, and are today, many eminent people in public and academic life who have a far greater claim to reflect on these issues than I have. Perhaps my only justification for even venturing into this field is to be found in Kipling when he wrote, “What should they know of England who only England know?” It may be, then, that to understand the precise relationship of the Christian faith to the public life of this nation, a perspective is helpful which is both rooted in the life of this country and able to look at it from the outside.

As I survey the field, what do I see? I find, first of all, “a descending theme” in terms of Christian influence. That is to say, I find that the systems of governance, of the rule of law, of the assumption of trust in common life all find their inspiration in Scripture; for example, in the Pauline doctrine of the godly magistrate and, ultimately, in the Christian doctrine of God the Holy Trinity, where you have both an ordered relationship and a mutuality of love. As Joan O’Donovan has pointed out, the notion of God’s right, or God’s justice, produced a network of divine, human and natural law which was the basis of a just ordering of society and also of a mutual sense of obligation “one towards another”, as we say at Prayers for the Parliament. Such a descending theme of influence continues to permeate society, but is especially focused in constitutional arrangements, such as the “Queen in Parliament under God”, the Queen’s Speech (which always ends with a prayer for Almighty God to bless the counsels of the assembled Parliament), daily prayers in Parliament, the presence of bishops in the House of Lords, the national flag, the national anthem — the list could go on. None of this should be seen as “icing on the cake” or as interesting and tourist-friendly vestigial elements left over from the Middle Ages. They have the purpose of weaving the awareness of God into the body politic of the nation.

In addition to this “descending theme”, there is also what we might call the “ascending theme”, which comes up from below to animate debate and policy-making in the institutions of state. Much of this has to do with our estimate of the human person and how that affects the business of making law and of governance. Such an estimate goes right back to the rediscovery of Aristotle by Europe — a rediscovery, incidentally, made possible by the work of largely Christian translators in the Islamic world. These translators made Aristotle, and much else besides, available to the Muslims, who used it, commented upon it and passed it on to Western Europe. One of the features of the rediscovery was a further appreciation of the human person as agent by Christian thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas. They were driven to read the Bible in the light of Aristotle and this had several results which remain important for us today.

One was the discovery of conscience. If the individual is morally and spiritually responsible before God, then we have to think also of how conscience is formed by the Word of God and the Church’s proclamation of it so that freedom can be exercised responsibly. Another result was the emergence of the idea that because human beings were moral agents, their consent was needed in the business of governance. It is not enough now simply to draw on notions of God’s justice for patterns of government. We need also the consent of the governed who have been made in God’s image (a term which comes into the foreground). This dual emphasis on conscience and consent led to people being seen as citizens rather than merely as subjects.

The Reformation also had a view about governance as well as the significance of the individual, which was to prove important for the future. The theme of natural rights was taken up by the Dominicans on the Continent in the context of defending the freedom and the possessions of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. From there, it influenced prominent thinkers of the moderate Enlightenment in this country, such as John Locke, who were attempting to rethink a Christian basis for society. This was also the context for the Evangelical revival in the 18th century. While the Evangelicals drew inspiration from the Bible for their humanitarian projects, such as the abolition of slavery, universal education and humane conditions of work for men, women and children, the Enlightenment provided them with the intellectual tools and the moral vision of natural rights so that they could argue their case in the public sphere. It was this Evangelical-Enlightenment consensus which brought about the huge social changes of the 19th and early 20th centuries and which came under sustained attack in the second half of the 20th century.

Sociologists of religion have been telling us that the process of secularisation has been a very long one and, indeed, they locate its origin precisely in the Enlightenment’s rejection of heteronomous authority and its affirmation of autonomy. Historians, on the other hand, point out that faith flourished in industrial Britain in the 19th century and in the first part of the last century. Indeed, it is possible to say that it continued to prosper well into the 1950s. Was it long-term decline, then, or sudden demise? In fact, there are elements of truth in both approaches. It seems to be the case, however, that something momentous happened in the 1960s which has materially altered the scene: Christianity began to be more and more marginal to the “public doctrine” by which the nation ordered itself, and this state of affairs has continued to the present day.

Many reasons have been given for this situation. Callum Brown has argued that it was the cultural revolution of the 1960s which brought Christianity's role in society to an abrupt and catastrophic end. He notes, particularly, the part played by women in upholding piety and in passing on the faith in the home. It was the loss of this faith and piety among women which caused the steep decline in Christian observance in all sections of society. Peter Mullen and others, similarly, have traced the situation to the student unrest of the 1960s which they claim was inspired by Marxism of one sort or another. The aim was to overturn what I have called the Evangelical-Enlightenment consensus so that revolution might be possible. One of the ingredients in their tactics was to encourage a social and sexual revolution so that a political one would, in due course, come about. Mullen points out that instead of the Churches resisting this phenomenon, liberal theologians and Church leaders all but capitulated to the intellectual and cultural forces of the time.

It is this situation that has created the moral and spiritual vacuum in which we now find ourselves. While the Christian consensus was dissolved, nothing else, except perhaps endless self-indulgence, was put in its place. Happily Marxism, in its various forms, has been shown to be the philosophical, historical and economic nonsense that it always was. But we are now confronted by another equally serious ideology, that of radical Islamism, which also claims to be comprehensive in scope. What resources do we have to face yet another ideological battle?

The scrambling and scratching around of politicians and of elements in the media for "values" which would provide ammunition in this battle are to be seen in this light. As we have seen, however, this is extremely thin gruel and hardly adequate for the task before us. Our investigation has shown us the deep and varied ways in which the beliefs, values and virtues of Great Britain have been formed by the Christian faith. The consequences of the loss of this discourse are there for all to see: the destruction of the family because of the alleged parity of different forms of life together; the loss of a father figure, especially for boys, because the role of fathers is deemed otiose; the abuse of substances (including alcohol); the loss of respect for the human person leading to horrendous and mindless attacks on people; the increasing communications gap between generations and social classes. The list is very long.

Is it possible to restore such discourse to the heart of our common life? Some would say it is not possible. Matters have gone too far in one direction and we cannot retrace our steps. Others would be hostile to the very idea. They have constructed their lives and philosophies around the demise of Christianity as an element in public life, and they would be very inconvenienced if it were to put in an appearance again. It remains the case, however, that many of the beliefs and values which we need to deal with the present situation are rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Are we to receive these as a gift, in our present circumstances, or, once again, turn our backs on them?

In the context of public discussion, and even in the case of legislation, crude utilitarianism, public approbation or revulsion (the so-called yuck factor) or the counting of heads are being found increasingly unsatisfactory, especially when an estimate of the human person is involved. Nor are the "thin" values of respect, decency and fairness enough. We need something more robust. In such situations, we often find overt or covert appeals to transcendental principles enshrined in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

When, for example, we are discussing questions of mental capacity, and whether it is ever right to regard someone as having irreversibly lost crucial indicators of being human, or issues to do with the beginnings or end of life, such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research or euthanasia, transcendental principles are often invoked which derive from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. One such, which is to be found in the fundamental documents of the age, is that of inalienable dignity; that is to say, the dignity of the human person cannot be taken away. It inheres in them by virtue of their personhood. The question then remains as to whether there is a human person involved in a particular situation.

I was for some years the chairman of the ethics and law committee of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, and the question that often arose was: at what point does human dignity attach to the embryo or foetus? Now, I take a developmental view of how personhood emerges in the early stages of life, but even if you take such a view, you still have to exercise the precautionary principle because you do not know exactly when there *is* a person. Is it at conception, at implantation or at the beginning of brain activity or the ability to feel pain? This is why the embryo is treated with special respect in legislation so that we, even unknowingly, do not violate human dignity. The notion that human beings possess dignity which can never be taken away cannot be justified in terms only of public opinion and even less of utilitarianism. It is, in fact, grounded in the biblical idea that humans have been made in the image of God and this gives them a dignity which cannot be violated or removed from them.

Equality is another leading value which we use in a just ordering of society. On the face of it, human beings are not equal: they are rich and poor, black and white, differently abled, male and female. So what is our basis for saying they are equal? During the period of white settlement in Australia, Christian missionaries, in the face of settler opposition, again and again referred to Acts xvii 26: "Out of blood hath he made all the nations of men" as the basis for the equality of the aboriginal peoples with the white and Asian inhabitants. Equality, then, is also rooted in the biblical world-view and extends to the whole of humanity. It is not restricted to those who may belong to a particular faith, ideology or ethnicity.

The idea of liberation is as fundamental in the Bible as that of creation. The freeing of enslaved Israel from its captors has inspired many other captive or oppressed peoples to struggle for their freedom. Freedom, however, has to do not only with political or social liberation. It also has to do with respect for conscience. Once again, this is rooted in the insight of Reformation times that everyone had the right to read the Word of God in their own language and to be formed by it. The freedom and the responsibility of such a citizen are closely related to the development of conscience in the light of the Scriptures.

Freedom is not, of course, absolute. It is only possible in the context of the Common Good, where the freedom of each has to be exercised with respect for the freedom of all. Freedom of belief, of expression, and the freedom to change one's belief are, however, vitally important for a free society, and the onus must be on those who wish to restrict these in any way to show why this is necessary. Nor can we say that such freedoms apply in some parts of the country and of the world and not in others. The rule of law must guarantee, and be seen to guarantee, such basic freedoms everywhere.

Safety from harm is certainly a leading concern in legislation today but this should not be too narrowly conceived. It depends on the biblical idea of shalom, of wholeness, peace and safety, not only of the individual but also of society as a whole. The debate between Lord Devlin and H. L. A. Hart of Oxford, in the middle years of the last century, was precisely about the scope of the “safety from harm” idea. Was it limited to the individual or did it extend to vital social institutions such as the family? Devlin was clear that it must extend to the latter also, and that fiscal and social legislation should take account of this aspect of safety from harm of a nation’s social capital.

One final value which deserves to be mentioned is that of hospitality. It is indeed ironic that Britain had to cope with large numbers of people from other faiths and cultures arriving at exactly the time when there was a catastrophic loss of Christian discourse. Thus Christian hospitality, which should have welcomed the new arrivals on the basis of Britain’s Christian heritage, to which they would be welcome to contribute, was replaced by the newfangled and insecurely founded doctrine of multiculturalism. This offered “tolerance” rather than hospitality, in some cases benign neglect rather than engagement, and an emphasis on cultural and religious distinctiveness rather than integration. As a succession of social commentators — Lord Ouseley, Trevor Phillips and Ted Cantle come to mind — have pointed out, the result has been segregated communities and parallel lives, rather than an awareness of belonging together and a common citizenship which foster integration and respect for fundamental freedoms for all.

It may be worth saying here that integration does not mean assimilation. It is quite possible for people to be engaged with wider society, to be aware of common values, to speak English and to have a sense of citizenship while also maintaining cultural and religious practices in terms of language, food, dress, worship and so on. The example of the Jewish and Huguenot communities, and of many more recent arrivals, gives us hope that integration and distinctiveness are not incommensurable qualities.

While some acknowledge the debt which Britain owes to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, they claim also that the values derived from it are now free-standing and that they can also be derived from other world-views. As to them being free-standing, the danger, rather, is that we are living on past capital which is showing increasing signs of being exhausted. Values and virtues by which we live require what Bishop Lesslie Newbigin called “plausibility structures” for their continuing credibility. They cannot indefinitely exist in a vacuum.

Nor can we be too sanguine that other world-views or traditions will necessarily produce the same values or put the same emphasis on them. Radical Islamism, for example, will emphasise the solidarity of the *umma* (worldwide community of the Muslim faithful) against the freedom of the individual. Some will give more importance to public piety — in fasting and feasting, calling to prayer and observing prayer time — than others who may wish to stress the interior aspects of the spiritual. There will be different attitudes to the balance between social institutions and personal freedom, and even on how communities should be governed. Instead of the Christian virtues of humility, service and sacrifice, there may be honour, piety and the importance of “saving face”.

The assumptions and values by which we live have been formed in the crucible of the Christian faith and its aftermath, the Enlightenment. This is the result of a quite specific history, and it is not at all necessary that such beliefs and values should arise in or survive in quite different contexts. To argue for the continuing importance of these is not necessarily to argue for the privileging of any Church. It is quite possible to imagine a situation where there is no established Church, but where Christian discourse remains important for public life. For better or for worse, the United States is a good example of such a situation.

The Westphalian consensus is dead. It arose for historical reasons in Europe where it was felt that, for the sake of peace, religion had to be separated from public life. Even then, the identification of religion alone as the decisive factor in the conflict was debatable. We are now, however, in a global context where we will not be able to escape the problems raised by faith for public life. The question, then, is not “should faith have a role in public life?” but what *kind* of role it should have. Every temptation to theocracy, on every side, must be renounced. There is no place for coercion where the relationship of religion to the state is concerned. But there is room for persuasion; to argue our case in terms of the common good and human flourishing, and to show how these depend on our spiritual vision.

At the same time, government will have to be increasingly open to religious concerns and to make room for religious conscience, as far as it is possible to do so. Religious leaders, for their part, will seek to guide their peoples in the light of their faith and to seek to make a contribution to public life on the same basis. The integrity and autonomy of public authority and of the law will also have to be recognised, and it would be best if religious law in its application were left to the communities and to the free obedience of their members. Public law, however, should continue to provide overarching protection for all.

In the specific case of sharia law, of course, Muslims will continue to be guided by it, but recognising its jurisdiction in terms of public law is fraught with difficulties precisely because it arises from a different set of assumptions from the tradition of law here. The contradictions that emerge would be very difficult to resolve. At the same time, it should be possible for Muslims to contribute to the development of a common life by bringing the *maqasid*, or principles of the sharia, to bear on the discussion. These have to do with the protection of the individual and of society and can be argued on their own merits without attempting to align two quite different systems of law.

Christian faith has been central to the emergence of our nation and its development. We cannot really understand the nature and achievements of British society without reference to it. In a plural, multi-faith and multicultural society, it can still provide the resources for both supporting and providing a critique of public life in this country. We have argued that it is necessary to understand where we have come from, to guide us to where we are going, and to bring us back when we wander too far from the path of national destiny.

## **Only God Can Save Us from Ourselves**

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It is hard to believe that a whole year has passed since the launch of *Standpoint* with my article, "Breaking Faith with Britain", in the inaugural issue. In that article, I tried to show how there was a descending theme of Christian influence on the systems of governance, the rule of law and the assumptions of trust in our common life. The ascending theme of the importance of the person as a moral agent and, therefore, as free was also seen to arise out of the biblical vision of humans as made in God's image and as exercising stewardship in the world. This discourse became hugely important in the emergence of natural or human rights language, particularly, but not only, as it was developed by the Enlightenment. I noted that there had been an Evangelical-Enlightenment consensus in place until the 1950s, which had brought about huge changes in society in its attitudes towards slavery, the treatment of workers, universal education, care of the sick and the dying and a host of other areas of life. It has been the dissolution of this consensus that has created the situation in which we now find ourselves. A basically Judaeo-Christian framework for public life has been seriously weakened, some aspects of it have disappeared entirely and others survive only in vestigial form.

By any standard of measurement, the past year has been momentous. The financial crisis had us reeling as the value of our savings and our homes plummeted. As people felt less secure about their jobs, they spent less and gave less. Not only did High Street businesses suffer but charities were also affected. It is true, of course, that the financial crisis was brought about by a failure of regulation, especially in taking account of the growing complexity of global market transactions. But it was also brought about by moral failure. Even if we grant that market processes are "amoral" in themselves, we cannot deny that we are moral agents as we act within those processes and are thus responsible for our actions. In the past, the best of British financial and commercial life was characterised by the values of responsibility, honesty, trust and hard work. Such values arose from a specifically Christian view of accountability before God, the sacredness of even the most humble task (as George Herbert said, "Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine") and the recognition of mutual obligation by people of all classes and callings, one towards another. This rich tradition was set aside in favour of an entrepreneurial free for all and winner takes all ethos. We are now seeing the results. Far from engendering the wealth which would have benefited society as a whole, it has actually left not only this generation but future ones as well in such significant debt that it will affect the lives of us all for the foreseeable future.

Just as we were staggering back to our feet, we have been hit this time by the political fireball. Once again, it is important to see this as a moral, and even a spiritual, crisis. This is so in two ways: first, the weakening of a moral and spiritual framework for society has left people without an anchor for the mooring of their moral lives and without guidance by which to steer through the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary dilemmas. Second, the lack of a framework has meant that there is no touchstone by which to judge a person's actions as right or wrong. No wonder everyone has been doing what is right in their own eyes and to their own advantage. It is clear that simply tinkering with political structures and processes will not solve the problems. A

smaller Parliament or electoral reform may be good things to have, but they will not address the questions we are facing and have to answer. These have to do with a clear moral and spiritual framework for public life. The values of human dignity, equality, liberty and security, as well as virtues like selflessness, sacrifice and service, have arisen from a Judaeo-Christian worldview. It cannot be assumed that they would also necessarily have arisen from other worldviews, though agreed values with people of different world-view can, of course, be negotiated on the basis of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Any code of conduct for MPs, for example, should both acknowledge and draw upon such a rich moral and spiritual tradition rather than, once again, dishing out the familiar panaceas of the past, politically correct, but empty of content.

Simply extolling "Britishness" or "British values" is not enough. It is not enough even to remind ourselves of the importance of Christian faith for Britain. We need to ask, first of all, *how* our understanding of the basic political and social institutions of public life is affected by our knowledge of the ways in which Christianity has shaped them. This will shed, I believe, a flood of light on their basic purpose, on how they have developed and what shape they might take in the future. If our understanding of these institutions, their origin and purpose is superficial and functional, this will have an adverse effect on the depth of our commitment to them.

We have to go on and ask how a Christian vision, its values and virtues, impinge on our day-to-day life and the questions this raises. We have seen already how this is crucial to personal integrity in public life. So many of our moral dilemmas have to do with a proper estimate of the human person. These arise, in their sharpest forms, when people are most vulnerable, when they cannot defend themselves and where society has the task of protecting them. In other words, they arise at the earliest stages of personhood and at the latest, when there are questions of mental capacity or even of mental illness. Without a lodestar, such as the *imago dei*, we could quickly run aground on the rocks of crude utilitarianism (the weak can be sacrificed for some greater good or the good of a larger number) or be marooned on the shifting sands of public opinion polls. For instance, while it may be correct to take a developmental view of the emergence of a human person through the stages of fertilisation, implantation, the beginning of brain activity and so on, we still cannot say exactly *when* there is a person. Instead of greater permissiveness, this should lead to greater caution about any procedures, which aim to manipulate the early foetus or embryo to benefit someone else. We should also be concerned for its integrity as personhood unfolds.

At the other end of the life-cycle, while it is never permissible to kill, we are not required officiously to keep alive either. People may decline medical intervention, if they are competent to do so, and death may result when the primary aim is to relieve pain. Living wills may also be respected, though they pose certain dilemmas of their own. If, for instance, they are made too far in advance of the circumstances contemplated, they may not be able to specify exactly what the person concerned is wishing to refuse or to accept. If, on the other hand, they are made in the course of a serious illness, the question would be whether a person's judgment is clouded by their illness or even by direct or indirect pressure from relatives. In any event, it cannot be permissible actively to take life, or to assist in doing so, even in situations where a person is alive but not responsive to our signals or to the environment generally. This is because the dignity of personhood is inalienable and cannot be taken away by human agency, except, perhaps, in clearly specified circumstances such as self-defence or a just war.



A widespread nihilism in culture has led to a lack of consensus about the sacredness of the human person and, in turn, this provides a context for the horrendous and mindless violence inflicted on people, even on young children. We cannot expect respect for the person if we do not give any reasons why persons should be respected. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is also true of racism. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, based on the Bible, teaches the common origin and equality of all human beings. It may be that Christians have not always upheld such equality in practice but without its basis, as we have seen in doctrines of "scientific racism" and eugenics, the weak will have no defence against oppression and exploitation by the powerful.

The family is an important aspect of biblical anthropology which sees man and woman as ordered to one another in a stable relationship of receiving and giving. It is this mutuality and complementarity, which provides not only support and companionship but the stability required for the nurture of children. The family then is a basic unit of society and any dysfunction will surely affect other areas of our social life. It is true, of course, that Christians themselves have sometimes used family structures to abuse and exploit the more vulnerable members of the family, often women, children or the elderly. In this, they are not alone as such abuse of the family is widespread and can be seen in many parts of the world. But does such abuse or misuse justify the full frontal attack on the family, which we have seen in most Western countries in the last 30 years or so? The Office for National Statistics and other bodies regularly publish figures for marriage, divorce, single-parent families, cohabitation and how long it lasts, etc. This is not the place to go into the detail of these figures save to note the social devastation they represent: families everywhere with a parent (usually the father) absent, the psychological trauma of broken relationships, children without crucial bonding with one parent (usually the father) and for boys the lack of a role model as they grow up.

In fact, the attack on the family has been part of a wider aim to subvert the fundamental institutions of society because they were regarded as bourgeois, patriarchal or exclusive. At first, this was to prepare the ground for a Marxist-type political revolution. When this did not come about, the social revolution became an end in itself, the purpose of which was to free individuals from cumbersome ties so they could better fulfil themselves. Relationships should be entered into freely without social coercion, it is held, and should last only as long as they nurture individuals' self-fulfilment. Criticism by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and others of those who regard heterosexual marriage as "absolute, exclusive and ideal" is based on such views of "pure relationships", which are about mutual desire and its fulfilment. If and when such desire ceases, it is both wicked and useless to seek a continuation of the relationship that is generated by the persons themselves, as Anthony Giddens has taught, and is not about satisfying a formal socio-religious criterion.

It is not a surprise that with these views, a plethora of relationships, where there is due consent and which do not exploit the young or vulnerable, will increasingly be seen as valid expressions of being family. Such social constructivism will either treat with amused contempt or actively oppose any attempt to uphold a normative view of the family which values permanence, stability, responsibility towards one another and towards any children or, indeed, which regards the family as a basic unit of society and thus fulfilling a vital social function.

The abolition of the family is certainly one of the causes of social dysfunction and of fragmentation in our society but it is not the only one. An all-pervasive historical amnesia is another. People are simply not told about the foundations on which their society is built or about the "perfectly virtuous pages" of their history. No wonder then that when they have to grapple with cultural and religious difference, they have no vantage point from which to tackle the issues arising in a plural society. Let it be understood straightaway that diversity is to be celebrated and respected and can enrich any society. A Christian view of society would have emphasised hospitality for those coming to live in this country as well as being the means of welcoming their contribution to the development of social and political discourse. At the same time, it would have continued to uphold the common good which would necessarily have included a concern for the most disenfranchised of those who were here already and also for the social and economic fabric of the nation in relation to a changing demography. What we got was a multiculturalism built on amnesia. On the grounds of tolerance, it consigned newer arrivals to ghettos where, it was imagined, they would be happier with their own kind. The housing, education and social policies of the elite, who were themselves largely unaffected by them, reinforced the separation, fostering, as we have seen,

ignorance rather than engagement, fear rather than neighbourliness and resentment rather than generosity. It has led to extremism, of different kinds, flourishing because of the lack of a vision of a just, compassionate and neighbourly society based on a meta-narrative which provided the grounding for adequate social capital.

We certainly need a recovery of memory: regarding the basis of our national life, a tradition of civil liberties set in train by the Magna Carta, the Reformation's insistence on direct access to the sources of the authority (the Scriptures) for everyone, the Counter-Reformation's missionary zeal, the Christian origins of "natural rights" language, campaigns to abolish the slave trade and slavery, to restrict working hours and to improve working conditions for men, women and children, universal education, the emergence of nursing as a profession, the hospice movement and much else besides. Such a recovery of memory in our schools and other educational institutions, for instance, would not be for the sake of nostalgia or to foster national pride but to provide the basis for an engagement with contemporary issues whether these have to do with fundamental liberties, the inclusion of the marginalised, the care of the sick or concern for the poor, whether in this country or abroad.

Such a recovery of memory will make it possible for people once again to invoke fundamental principles, what Professor Peter Hennessey has called "the timeliness of the timeless". It is not necessary, by the way, for such an owning of the Christian vision to require a special position for a particular Church. It is quite possible to distinguish, as Martin Marty has done in the American context, between civic and ecclesial religion. While the churches would remain concerned, of course, to promote a Christian vision of society, a Christian-inspired civic religious sense would be distinct from each of them, as well as related to and responsive to their view of the role of religion in the public sphere.

Even and, perhaps specially, in this context, the Church's prophetic role will be needed. It will still be necessary to ask for proper discernment before policies are made or legislation passed, churches will remain in the business of forming consciences and in "telling it like it is". There

will have to be both a clear foretelling in terms of what is good for society and what would harm it, or people within it, and a foretelling about the consequences of misgovernment, corruption, self-indulgence and the rest. Christian faith is not simply an endorsement of the status quo or even a justification of history. It must also be able to bring a powerful critique to bear on our national life.

Any vision of a Christian society is strongly challenged by what may be called "programmatic secularism". This has its own worldview where there is progress but no purpose, where human dignity, equality and liberty may be affirmed but there is no underlying narrative why they should be. It often has a libertarian focus, which emphasises individual liberty but is weak on upholding vital social institutions. Its permissiveness can endanger not only social institutions, like the family, but also, for example, the human person at the earliest, most vulnerable and latest stages of life. It can be in thrall to the latest scientific possibilities and willing to give its imprimatur to them, regardless sometimes of personal and social consequences.

In addition to this, and arguably more widespread, is what has been called "procedural secularism". This assumes that the public space is a *tabula rasa* and that consensus about the issues of the day will develop as all sides contribute to the debate. In its best forms, it is willing to allow religious perspectives to be active in this debate. The problem is, of course, that the public space is not, and never has been, a blank slate on which anything can be written. It has its own plausibility structures, assumptions and norms. If these are not informed by a Christian vision, they will undoubtedly be informed by some other paradigm, whether that is Marxism, programmatic secularism or some other worldview. The people of this country have to decide which they would rather have: the tried and tested paradigm of the Christian faith, which, even if imperfectly understood and applied, has served them well, or untested theories which may appear to confer greater liberty on individuals but which can lead to social disaster.

The crises have revealed the peril in which we find ourselves. What is the way out of danger? We should not put too much hope in the institutions somehow renewing themselves. What we need are genuinely popular movements for the renewal of national life as a whole. One of the elements missing in the political life of this country is Christian Democracy. I am not saying that we should simply imitate what happens in Europe and elsewhere but politicians of all kinds should consider whether political movements founded on Christian principles would be beneficial for the political process.

It may be that we need a grand assembly of political and community leaders and the Third Sector, as well as representatives of churches and faith communities to discuss these issues openly and thoroughly so that a national consensus may emerge. We want a nation at ease with itself where relationships, each in its own way, are deep and enduring, where there is opportunity for the nurture of the soul as well as the body and where there is a clear moral and spiritual vision which is about the destiny of persons as well as communities. If we can obtain a consensus, which is not only political and economic but also spiritual and moral, then these crises we are facing will have been worth it.