

REITH LECTURES 1990: The Persistence of Faith

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Lecture 1: The Environment of Faith

TRANSMISSION: 14 November 1990 - Radio 4

There are moments when you can see the human landscape change before your eyes, and 1989 was one of them. In retrospect it will seem as significant a turning point in history as 1789, the year of the French Revolution and the birth of the secular state. Throughout Eastern Europe, communism appeared to crumble. The 20th century had broken its greatest idols, the two versions of an absolute secular state: fascism, defeated in 1945, and communism last year. But what, in this revolution of the human spirit, lies ahead?

In the middle of it all, the American historian Francis Fukuyama wrote an article entitled *The End of History*. In it he described the global spread of liberal democracy not as the triumph of an ideal, but as the victory of consumer culture. In the end, colour television had proved a more seductive prospect than *The Communist Manifesto*. Politics had moved beyond ideology. As Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, put it, 'the struggle between two opposing systems' had been superseded by the desire 'to build up material wealth at an accelerated rate'. Dialectical materialism was over; mail-order catalogue materialism had taken its place. Eastern Europe had discovered the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie.

It was, said Fukuyama, the end of history as we had known it: the struggle over ideas that had once called forth daring, courage and imagination. Instead, we would increasingly see societies based on nothing but the free play of choices and interests. What would absorb the human imagination would no longer be large and visionary goals but 'economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands'. History would end not with the sound of apocalypse but the beat of a personal stereo.

Fukuyama's analysis takes us deep into irony. Because such a brave new world suggests a massive impoverishment of what we are as human beings, its accuracy as a prediction is matched only by its narrowness as a prescription. The human being as consumer neither is, nor can be, all we are, and a social system built on that premise will fail. The East has engaged in self-examination and has turned for inspiration to the West. But the West has yet to return the compliment and ask whether its own social fabric is in a state of good repair.

I believe it is not. And the problem lies not with our economic and political systems, but in a certain emptiness at the heart of our common life. Something has been lost in our consumer culture: that sense of meaning beyond ourselves that was expressed in our great religious traditions. It is not something whose eclipse we can contemplate with equanimity. Religious faith is central to a humane social order. To paraphrase a rabbinic saying: if we have only a secular society, even a secular society we will not have.

For some years, we have known that unrestricted pursuit of economic growth has devastated our physical environment. Pollution, waste and the depletion of natural resources have disturbed that 'narrow strip of soil, air and water ... in which we live and move and have our being.' No one intended it. It happened. But, having happened, we can no longer ignore it, and whether our political commitments are blue or orange or red, we have all gone green. We have become aware that there are limits to growth.

But, as well as a physical ecology, we also inhabit a moral ecology: that network of beliefs, relationships and virtues within which we think, act and discover meaning. For the greater part of human history it has had a religious foundation. But for the past two centuries, in societies like Britain, that basis of belief has been profoundly eroded. And we know too much about ecological systems to suppose that you can remove one element and leave the rest unchanged. There is, if you like, a God-shaped hole in our ozone layer. And it's about time we thought about moral ecology too.

I speak from within the Jewish tradition, in which religion is more than what the individual does with his own solitude. God enters society in the form of specific ways of life, disclosed by revelation, mediated by tradition, embellished by custom and embodied in institutions. Faith lives not only in the privacy of the soul but in compassion and justice: the structures of our common life. The Hebrew Bible and the rabbis saw society as a covenant with God, and morality as a divine imperative. That tradition has deep echoes in Christianity and Islam as well, and has shaped our moral imagination.

To it we owe our ideas of the dignity of the individual as the image of God, and the sanctity of human life. It underlies our belief that we are free and responsible, not merely the victims of necessity and chance. And if we think of society as the place where we realise a vision of the good, somewhere behind that thought lies the influence of Exodus and Deuteronomy and Amos and Isaiah.

But one of the most powerful assumptions of the 20th century is that faith is not like that. It belongs to private life. Religion and society are two independent entities, so that we can edit God out of the language and leave our social world unchanged. After all, the whole history of the modern mind has been marked by the progressive detachment of knowledge from religious tradition. We no longer need, nor would we even think of invoking, God in order to understand nature or history. That battle was fought and lost by religion in the 19th century. But if what we know about ourselves and the world is independent of God, what difference could it make whether or not we still had religious faith? It might make all the difference to the private mind of the believer, but in the public world in which we act and interact, it should make no difference at all.

It was in the 1960s that we discovered how false this was. It was then that radical theologians took perverse pleasure in reciting that God—at least as we had known Him—was dead. But far from making no difference, that made a very great difference indeed. Because it was just then, in the decade of doing your own thing, that morality began to seem simply a matter of personal choice. A moral revolution was announced.

In 1967, Sir Edmund Leach began his Reith Lectures with the words, ‘Men have become gods. Isn’t it about time we understood our own divinity?’

A massive shift was taking place in our public culture. Something was lost which we have not yet replaced. Faith and society turned out to be connected after all. If the idea of God was in eclipse, so was the way of life which it served as a foundation. The biblical tradition and its hierarchy of values had lost their persuasive power. And for a moment, rather than lament the fact, we enjoyed our liberation.

The Sixties were probably the last time revolution could be sung to so cheerful a tune. Since then we have become increasingly aware of some of the problems of our social ecology: the urban slums, pollution, broken families and residual poverty which seem to yield neither to the welfare state nor to the minimalist state. We are less sure than we were that the future will be better than the past, that economic growth is open-ended or that Utopia can be brought by any sort of revolution. So long as confidence in human progress remained high, religious belief seemed a dispensable commodity. But that optimism has now been shattered. Technology, which seemed to give man godlike powers of creation, has given him also demonic possibilities for destruction. Our loss of a shared morality has fragmented our social world and made even our most intimate relationships seem fragile and conditional. The question is: what moral resources have we left to lend us faith in difficult times? And the answer surely is: far fewer in Fukuyama’s consumer culture than there are in the biblical tradition. We cannot edit God out of the language and leave our social world unchanged.

But is Britain yet a post-religious society? Suppose that you had just landed in Britain for the first time and you wanted to know whether you had arrived in a religious country. What signs would you see? You would certainly see some. Here and there you would notice large religious buildings, mainly churches and cathedrals, whose intricate grandeur suggested considerable prestige. You would discover that religious leaders, bishops in particular, were quoted in the newspapers and sat in the House of Lords. You would be struck by the fact that a large number of businesses stopped on Sunday and, asking why, would receive an explanation that could hardly fail to mention Christianity. You might stop to ask why so many people were called John or David or Sarah or Elizabeth and you would learn that these were originally figures in the Bible. Inquiring, you would find that four in five Britons still regard themselves as Christian, that there are ethnic minorities where different traditions are still strong, and that only a tiny minority of the population describe themselves as atheists or agnostics. You might conclude that you had arrived in a religious society.

But you could hardly fail to notice different indicators as well. Examining the city skyline, you might well suspect that the true cathedrals of the urban landscape are office blocks. You would notice that the arenas where crowds gathered and formed temporary communions were football matches and pop concerts. You would see far fewer people engaged in spiritual exercises than in physical exercises. And if you came across individuals in solitary meditation, they would probably be watching a video rather than reading the *Book of Common Prayer*.

You might be perplexed that so many churches had so few people in them; that there were urban areas where fewer than one in a hundred attended church on Sunday. And you would be struck by the fact that the largest crowds visiting cathedrals were

tourists, not worshippers. Religion might be, in Stevie Smith's words, not waving but drowning.

What would you make of it all? You would, I think, rightly conclude that these survivals of religion were just that: survivals, residues of an earlier age in which religious institutions played a far greater part in our culture than they do today. But you might notice this as well. That places of worship weren't quite yet museums. Inside them, you weren't an observer or spectator only. You participated. They were perhaps the one place left where you stood in a living relationship with the past.

How is it, then, that religion, that was so central a component of the culture of the past, has come to be so marginal in the present? It is a story part-intellectual, part-social. There was the rise of experimental science in the 17th century, the discovery that you could find out more about the world by observing it and framing hypotheses that could be tested, than by relying on past traditions: what Don Cupitt calls the shift from myths to maths. There were the revolutionary changes in the way human beings were perceived: Spinoza's insistence that man, too, is a part of nature and subject to its laws. Marx's suggestion that our ideas are the product of economic forces, and Darwin's discovery that, as someone once put it, man's family tree goes back to the time when his ancestors were swinging from it. Individually, these weakened the hold of the narrative in the first chapter of Genesis in which man was created in the image of God. Collectively, they suggested the power of free inquiry as against the authority of ancient texts, when it came to the pursuit of knowledge.

The biblical tradition, far from being able to stand aside from these developments, eventually came under their scrutiny. Once thinkers were able to distance themselves from religion's claims, they were able to see it as a phenomenon to be explained like any other, in terms of economics or psychology, the projection on to heaven of human interests and needs. The supernatural had a natural explanation, and this weakened the idea of a divine intrusion into the human domain, immune to the relativities of time. The ideas, central to the Bible, of revelation, miracle and redemption were undermined.

And these intellectual developments went hand in hand with a transformation of society. It was difficult to see truth as timeless when the world was embarked on a roller-coaster of change. The industrial revolution broke up old crafts and communities and the traditions that went with them. And it changed the way people began to think about religion's most potent domain: ethics, or how to behave. An ethic which took science as its model would focus not on precedent but on consequences. Actions, like hypotheses, could be tested, and the best were those that produced the greatest happiness for the greatest number. All this meant a quite tangible shift in the direction of human thought, from past to future, from essence to function, from virtue to pragmatism, and from passivity to control. Not only were the communities disrupted in which religious traditions had been lived and transmitted, but the entire cast of mind in which biblical ideas found a home had now gone. Consciousness had been secularised.

And throughout it all, with few dissenting voices, the consensus was that it was a journey of moral progress. But, as they used to say in Yiddish: if things are so good,

how come they are so bad? Because our modern conviction that man is part of nature, subject to its laws, is much more like paganism than the biblical view of human dignity. The idea, which has gained great power in recent decades, that human life is dispensable through abortion or euthanasia looks more like a regression than a moral advance. And the notion that authenticity means making our own rules, is the loss of a world of value beyond the self. Wasn't the crucial biblical insight that something else might be true? That man, gifted with language and thus imagination, might seek meaning in the midst of chaos and come to experience it in the form of a moral call not implicit within nature, but beyond? We might well feel that the whole thrust of the scientific imagination when applied to human culture was not so much to elevate man to the status of a god, but to reduce him to the quintessence of dust, and brand all else an illusion. If so, we would have had our first intimation that what seemed so liberating about a postreligious age might be no more than a narrowing of human possibilities.

But only the first. For the fact, almost too obvious to need re-stating, is that not only have technological societies not replaced religious belief with some new overarching canopy of meaning. But in principle they could not do so. The very growth of modern knowledge has come about through specialisation and compartmentalisation, so that an integrated universe linking man and the cosmos is now beyond us. The more we know collectively, the less we know individually. Each of us understands very little of our world.

Not only that. The productive and social changes of the last two centuries have vastly multiplied our choices. Long gone are the days when our identities, beliefs, and life chances were narrowly circumscribed by where and to whom we happened to be born. We are no longer actors in a play written by tradition and directed by community, in which roles are allocated by accidents of birth. Instead, careers, relationships and lifestyles have become things we freely choose from a superstore of alternatives.

Modernity is the transition from fate to choice. At the same time it dissolves the commitments and loyalties that once lay behind our choices. Technical reason has made us masters of matching means to ends. But it has left us inarticulate as to why we should choose one end rather than another. The values that once led us to regard one as intrinsically better than another—and which gave such weight to words like good and bad have disintegrated, along with the communities and religious traditions in which we learned them. Now we choose because we choose. Because it is what we want; or it works for us; or it feels right to me. Once we have dismantled a world in which larger virtues held sway, what is left are success and self-expression, the key values of an individualistic culture.

But can a society survive on so slender a moral base? It is a question that was already raised in the 19th century by figures like Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber, who saw most clearly the connection between modern liberal democracies and Judaeo-Christian tradition. It was de Tocqueville who saw that religion tempered individualism and gave those engaged in the competitive economy a capacity for benevolence and self-sacrifice.

And it was he who saw that this was endangered by the very pursuit of affluence that was the key to economic growth. Max Weber delivered the famous prophetic warning

that the cloak of material prosperity might eventually become an iron cage. It was already becoming an end in itself, and other values were left, in his words, 'like the ghost of dead religious beliefs'. Once capitalism consumed its religious foundations, both men feared the consequences.

The stresses of a culture without shared meanings are already mounting, and we have yet to count the human costs. We see them in the move from a morality of self-imposed restraint to one in which we increasingly rely on law to protect us from ourselves. In the past, disadvantaged groups could find in religion what Karl Marx called 'the feeling of a heartless world'. A purely economic order offers no such consolations. A culture of success places little value on the unsuccessful.

The erosion of those bonds of loyalty and love which religion undergirded has left us increasingly alone in an impersonal economic and social system. Emile Durkheim was the first to give this condition a name. He called it anomie: the situation in which individuals have lost their moorings in a collective order. It is the heavy price we pay for our loss of communities of faith.

Fukuyama described a future dedicated to 'economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems ... and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands'. But is such a world socially viable? Not all human problems are technical. One, above all, is not: the search for meaning which gave rise to the religious imagination in the first place.

I have called the biblical tradition part of our moral ecology, by which I mean that until recently the language of British and American politics was rich in biblical themes: covenant and kinship, exodus and liberation, human dignity and responsibility. A religious vision could inspire Edmund Burke to conservatism, William Cobbett to socialism, and wend its variations from Thomas Jefferson to Martin Luther King. At times it spoke of the duty of the state to the individual, at others of the freedom of the individual against the state. It was a language, not a party political programme. But it was a distinctive language, quite unlike the vocabulary of a consumer culture, in which we speak only of rights and entitlements, interests and choices, self-expression and success. It referred to meanings beyond the self, to moral communities beyond the individual and to relationships more enduring than temporary compatibility. It was a language that linked private faith to public action. It brought together what modernity has split asunder: society and the self. It was this tradition that led the great Talmudist, Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk, to define the role of a religious leader as, 'to redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of his oppressor'. It moved one of Judaism's greatest mystics, the Rabbi of Kotzk, to say that someone else's material concerns are my spiritual concerns.

But it is just this that leads me to believe that Fukuyama's prediction has not yet come to pass. For we still see other people's suffering and poverty not as things that merely happen as part of an impersonal order, but as things we ought somehow to relieve. And, for so long as we do so, we have moved beyond a view of society as just the free play of interests. It remains a moral enterprise, actualising its values through history; the end point of which is redemption or, in Aaron Lichtenstein's fine phrase,

collective beatitude. We are back in the language of justice and compassion, words we once learned from the Bible and which led us to construct the society we have.

Which leads in turn to a significant conclusion: that, though our churches and synagogues are under-attended, people have not stopped identifying themselves as religious individuals; nor have they yet stopped thinking in religious ways. However attenuated, the attachments remain. And this means more than that religion is for us a matter of nostalgia, or habit, or memories of grandparents and a simpler way of life. It means that it still remains for us a possibility.

We are capable of being moved by calls to our conscience, to acts that make no sense in terms of self-fulfilment or private ambition. We have not yet lost the language of older and larger visions of the shared redemptive enterprise. We have it because the biblical tradition survives in our culture-marginal, endangered, a survival to be sure, but still there. Reminding us that the rules we make are subject to the rules we didn't make, and that the making of moral history is not yet at an end.