

REITH LECTURES 1990: The Persistence of Faith

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Lecture 6: A Community of Communities

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Religions, it is said, are always dying. But they never quite seem to die. Faith confounds prediction. One of our most tenacious beliefs these past two centuries has been that modern society would be the stage of religion's final, last performance. Against that I have suggested another phenomenon: the surprising persistence of faith.

It has been an unlikely and by no means simple story. Let's take an example. A hundred years ago we could have walked through the Jewish communities of London and seen a process in the making. We would begin in the East End, in Whitechapel. And we would find ourselves deep in the atmosphere of Eastern Europe. It is here that the Jewish immigrants arrived in the wake of the Russian pogroms of the 1880s. It is overcrowded, bustling, noisy, poor; an ethnic ghetto full of strange accents and smells. There are Jewish businesses everywhere: tailors and boot-makers and every few hundred yards a little synagogue. There is no doubt that we are in Jewish London.

A few miles to the west, in the synagogue in Duke's Place, we would find an altogether different kind of community: Jews who had been in England long enough to have established themselves economically, and to some extent socially as well. They have combined their religious orthodoxy with a decidedly Victorian manner. The men wear top hats and frock coats; the synagogue is decorous and ornate; the sermon will quote Shakespeare rather than the Talmud and will be delivered in grandiloquent prose. Anglo-Jews, conscious of the novelty of emancipation, have taken great pains to become anglicised.

Some have gone further still. Continuing our walk, we would arrive at London's first Reform synagogue, whose members believe that substantial accommodations are needed if Jews are to become part of English society. To the scandal of the Orthodox, they have introduced a mixed choir and an organ, abridged some of the festivals and amended the prayer book to make it more congenial to a rationalist age. A journey of five miles on a single morning in 1890 would have taken us through three generations in the process from immigration to acculturation.

Something like this journey has been the fate not just of Jews but of most of us, from English villagers to Irish Catholics to the most recent Sikh and Hindu immigrants. It is less a change of place than a change of consciousness: from parochial to cosmopolitan, local community to open society, from tradition to modernity. On the way, all the old ties are weakened: accents and attachments, particular identities—above all, religious commitment. They belong back in the foreign country called the past; accessible now only through nostalgia. Or so it seemed.

Because, suspending our hindsight and knowing only what we have seen in 1890, we could write the future of those Victorian Jews. In the journey from the East End to the

West, there has been a slow attenuation of Jewishness, from a total environment to occasional synagogue attendance. Jews were preparing for the 20th century by leaving their ancient world behind. We might have predicted that by 1990 they would have assimilated to the point of invisibility. There would be, at most, a few pockets of resistance: Jews who turned their back on the modern world. But for the rest, an open society would do what generations of persecution could not achieve. It would put faith into the museum of antiquities. The four-generation rule seemed unbreakable. The grandfather prays in Hebrew. The father prays in English. The son no longer prays. The grandson is no longer Jewish.

That was the prediction. Secularisation among Christians. Assimilation among Jews. For a long time the evidence supported it. But now it needs to be revised. Already in 1955, the American sociologist Nathan Glazer noted that something momentous had happened to Jews; more precisely, something had not happened. They had not stopped being Jews. By 1990 we can speak not merely of survival but of revival. In Anglo- as in American Jewry, every year there are new synagogues and schools. Jews are rediscovering the traditions whose loss their grandparents lamented. At Oxford today you can study Yiddish, the very language immigrant Jews laboured to forget. The study of Jewish history flourishes as Jews relive their once-relinquished past. *Back to the Future* has replaced *Gone with the Wind*.

And not only among Jews. Because this recovery of identity has been widespread, most obviously among ethnic groups, but in evangelical revivals as well. We will each explain it in our own way. For Jews, the story will include the transfiguring events of the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel. For Christians it might be told in terms of the traumas of modernity, fears of nuclear and chemical warfare, ecological concerns and the ever-growing inequalities between rich and poor. For Muslims, it might speak of disillusionment with the West and hopes for a cultural and political renaissance of Islam. Other groups will explain in other ways how ethnicity persisted or new forms of community were found.

It is as if we have reached the limits of assimilation into the neutral space of secular society. And hitting them, we have rebounded. A plural culture almost forces us into identifications of this kind. As national identity grows weaker, other identities fill the vacated space, and, of these, religion is the most personal and transmissible. Not only among minorities. Perhaps the most unexpected fact about contemporary Britain is that the overwhelming majority of the population has not stopped being Christian. It may not be reflected in church-going or religious observance. But it answers the question increasingly unanswerable in other terms. The question: Who am I?

But the prediction of deepening secularisation was not altogether mistaken. What has become clear, if paradoxical, is that religious identity can go hand in hand with a decline along all measurable axes of religious behaviour. We practise the rituals of faith less often. We go to places of worship rarely. We can be, it seems, religious and secular at the same time. And religion in a secular society is not what it is in a religious society.

Take contemporary Jewry. Like every other group, it has been affected by new patterns of behaviour radically at odds with traditional norms: mixed marriage, for example, or homosexuality or the rejection of sexually differentiated roles. In the past,

Jews who were drawn to these behaviours would have known that in so doing, they were parting company with Judaism. Today they are more likely to seek a home for them in the synagogue itself. So that Liberal Judaism is driven to ever-wider acceptance of untraditional values. It survives by becoming secularised.

But this creates an opposite reaction too. Jewish survival depends in high measure on the strength of the family: on the decision of Jews to marry, create Jewish homes and raise children committed to continuing the covenant. Until recently, that could almost be taken for granted. But no longer. There has been a sharp rise, in the last two decades, in the rates of mixed marriage, non-marriage and divorce. It has become harder to hand the tradition on across the generations. So that Jews who place a high value on family and continuity feel bound to raise the barriers between themselves and the surrounding society. They survive by refusing to become secularised.

Which is how religion in a secular society becomes polarised. For a majority, it is a tenuous association that does not break the rhythms of a life whose pulse is elsewhere. For a minority, it has become a counterrevolution against an apparent slide into moral anarchy. A plural and fragmented culture translates its divisions into the religious domain. It encourages both an extreme and diffuse liberalism and an extreme and concentrated conservatism, each obeying a different religious imperative: the one to bring religion to where people are; the other to bring people to where religion has always been.

Each religion has had its own critical issues: birth control or abortion or sexual ethics, the ordination of women or the interpretation of doctrine; in the case of Judaism, the very question, who is a Jew? Whether we speak of post-Vatican II Catholicism, or the current Church of England or diaspora Jewry, the coalition between liberals and conservatives has become increasingly fragile. Where one side speaks of autonomy, equality and rights, the other speaks of tradition, obedience and authority. They have become, as Shaw once said, divided by a common language.

But this is just part of a wider disintegration brought about by the loss of what Peter Berger called 'the sacred canopy', that overarching framework of shared meanings that once shaped individuals into a society. In its place has come pluralism: the idea that society is a neutral arena of private choices where every vision of the good carries its own credentials of authenticity. But pluralism carries an explosive charge of conflicting interpretations. We have seen some of them in recent arguments about blasphemy, religious broadcasting, multi-faith education and denominational schools. The irony of pluralism is that it leads us to expect a growth of tolerance, while in fact it lays the ground for new forms of intolerance. By dismantling and privatising the concept of a common good it means that no one position is forced to come to terms with the reality of any other.

It is no accident that as pluralism has gained ground, there has been a sharp increase in racial tension and anti-Semitism, and an air of insolubility about our most basic moral disagreements. Once we lose a common language, we enter the public domain as competing interest groups rather than as joint architects of a shared society. Communities are replaced by segregated congregations of the like-minded. It is an environment that encourages mutually exclusive visions of the good. And, at its

extreme, it produces a clash of fundamentalism, some liberal, some conservative, neither with the resources to understand the other.

It was Robert Bellah who suggested that our social ecology is no less important, and perhaps more fragile, than our natural ecology. It is damaged, he said, not only by war, genocide and political repression, but also by ‘the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone.’ That is a penetrating description of our own atomised culture. We have neglected the institutions needed to sustain communities of memory and character. The assumption has been that society could exist on the basis of the private choices of individuals and the occasional intervention of the state, as if these were the only significant entities in our social landscape. But a plural society needs a moral and cultural base. Ideally, to use Martin Marty’s phrase, it is a community of communities: a series of environments in which we learn local languages of identity alongside a public language of collective aspiration. It requires two things. It needs communities where individuals can feel that their values are protected and can be handed on to their children. And it needs an overarching sense of national community in which different groups are participants in a shared pursuit of the common good.

In recent years the key word in our political vocabulary has been the individual. In the 1960s the state retreated from the legislation of morality. In the 1980s it drew back from the economy and welfare. And it was assumed in both cases that public responsibility would be replaced by private virtue. Marriage and the sanctity of life would remain as values but would no longer be legally enforced. We would still be pained by deprivation, but we would address it through self-help and philanthropy. Private virtue was the building that would stay standing once the scaffolding of the state was removed.

But without the communities that sustain it, there is no such thing as private virtue. Instead, there is individualism: the self as chooser and consumer. And the free market can be a very harsh place for those who make the wrong choices. The shift from state to individual at a time when our communities have eroded has carried a high cost in poverty, homelessness, broken families and the drugs, vandalism and violence that go with the breakdown of meaning. In an individualistic culture, prizes are not evenly distributed. They go to those with supportive relationships. To those, in particular, with strong families and communities.

Think back again to the Jewish immigrants of the 1890s. They were not, I suspect, exceptional individuals. But they came with one great asset: a still-influential religious tradition. Few groups have moved faster from inner city to suburbia. And it is not hard to see why. In part, it had to do with the value Jews always placed on the family and education. Parents invested their hopes in their children and made sacrifices for their schooling. In part it had to do with community. Jews had had a long tradition of creating voluntary organisations, their own networks of support. And in part, too, it had to do with religious self-definition. The Jewish garment-workers in the East End had other sources of self-esteem than their place in the economic order. They had a history. They could stand outside their social situation. They could say, with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, that this is the worst of all possible worlds in which there is still hope. It was those essentially religious structures of solidarity that broke through the cycle of deprivation. And it is hard to see how that

dynamic could have been created by the state on the one hand, or disconnected individuals on the other.

Community is the missing third term in our social ecology: the local communities where we discover identity, and the national community where we conduct our conversation about the common good. At both levels, there is an important religious dimension. Locally, our many faiths and denominations are often our first source of belonging. It is in our congregations and ethnic communities, intermediate between the individual and the state, that we find our sense of enduring value, of continuity through change. It is here that the individual is rescued from isolation, that identities are forged and traditions handed on. The critic Peter Fuller once wrote that he doubted whether art could ever thrive 'outside that sort of living, symbolic order, with deep tendrils in communal life, which it seems a flourishing religion alone can provide'. And that is true about morality and the family as well. Their natural environment is community; and creating communities is religion's special power. It is this realm, larger than the individual, smaller than the state, that is, in our time, the primary religious domain.

But religion has a larger role to play as well, in charting our shared moral landscape, that sense of a common good that we need if our communities are to cohere as a society. In Britain, as in America, it was the biblical tradition in dialogue with secular voices that throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries tempered competition with compassion, individualism with responsibility, and gave the search for social justice its prophetic voice. It allowed us to understand ourselves not as replaceable units of production and consumption but as unique individuals capable of enduring commitments of benevolence and love.

For as long as that tradition was influential, we could count ourselves part of a continuing narrative handed on between parents and children, a drama of redemption or salvation within which our moral judgments took on a massive solidity. We stood in collective worship before the great mystery of existence itself, knowing that neither we nor our time were the measure of all things.

It was this that led Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about America in the 1830s, to call religion the first of its political institutions; that which taught Americans the 'art of being free'. He saw that individualism needed a counterbalance if it was not to consume the very society which gave it birth. Our political structures need a moral base which they cannot themselves create but without which they cannot survive. A culture split between economic and moral individualism, and a series of sectarian minorities, is unlikely to remain cohesive for long.

We have undervalued religion as part of our ecology. It is not hard to see why. With the rise of science we no longer needed it to explain our world. The growth of the modern state relieved it of its roles in welfare and education. Nor did we need religion as a form of social control, when we had law in the public domain and unrestricted choice in our private lives. Religion might survive. Whatever else happened, human beings would still be mortal and would suffer. They would respond to epiphanies and consolations. But if faith survived, it would do so in the margins of life. It would occupy a role in our culture not unlike that of music or art; a fascination

for some, but for most an occasional indulgence. As a public presence, its time had passed. It had died, but most people were too polite to say so.

But the obituary was stunningly premature. Religion, allied to nationalism, has emerged as perhaps the most powerful political force in the post-Cold War world. Even in Britain, I suspect that we will hear more about it in the future than for a long time past. There will be the decade of evangelism; anguished voices within Islam; periodic tensions in Catholicism and perhaps the Jewish community as well. Religion will not seem merely marginal. It will be the arena of deep moral and social debates. In part, this may be prompted by thoughts of the coming millennium, but in part it will reflect a growing realisation that we stand at a significant juncture of our cultural history. No less fateful than the one two centuries ago that brought forth the Enlightenment, the modern economy and the secular state.

We have run up against the limits of a certain view of human society: one that believed that progress was open-ended, that there was no limit to economic growth, that conflict always had a political solution, and that all solutions lay with either the individual or the state. We will search, as we have already begun to do, for an ethical vocabulary of duties as well as rights; for a new language of environmental restraint; for communities of shared responsibility and support; for relationships more enduring than those of temporary compatibility; and for that sense, that lies at the heart of the religious experience, that human life has meaning beyond the self.

These are themes central to the great religious traditions; and we will not have to reinvent them. I have suggested that, in a sense, we are already more religious than we assume. When we look at figures of church membership or attendance, ours seems to be a lapsed society. But there are more ways than this that religion enters our lives. The overwhelming majority of Britons still claim affiliation with the religion of their birth. An established church places faith at the centre of our national symbols. We turn to worship at great moments of crisis or transition. Religion tells us who we are.

But more than that. If someone invented a religion-detector and passed it over the surface of our culture, the needle would swing when it came to our still strong convictions that compassion and justice should be part of social order, that human life is sacred, that marriage and the nurture of children are not just one lifestyle among many. When we lack power, we still feel responsible. When we see others suffering, we can still feel pain. These are traces that the biblical tradition has left deep within our culture: signals of transcendence that can at times move us to otherwise unaccountable acts of conscience and courage.

However tenuous our religious attachments are, they have not yet ceased, and that means that they can be renewed. The question is, what form will they take? For the past century religion has been embattled and defensive. And this has led to the two religious stances most common in the modern world; a diffuse liberalism, on the one hand, sanctifying secular trends after the event, and a reactive extremism, on the other, willing us back into a golden age that neither was nor will be again. The two live by their sibling rivalries, each seeing the other as the main threat to salvation. And they remind us that, as well as being cohesive, religion can be divisive.

Neither, I believe, is the shape of a coherent future. Liberalism, by placing its faith in the individual, only accelerates the loss of community. Religious extremism seeks to impose a single truth on a plural world. Together they suggest to an age already educated into scepticism that religion divides into the relevant but empty and the authentic but fanatical. These are not the religious imperatives of our time.

Religions are the structures of our common life. In their symbols and ceremonies, the lonely self finds communion with others who share a past and future and a commitment to both. In their visions, we discover the worth of un-self-interested action, and we find, in the haunting words of the Rabbi of Kotzk, that God exists wherever we let Him in. Education and inspiration will renew our communities of faith. The question will be whether they can be revived without the intolerances that once made religion a source of prejudice as well as pride. In our plural, dangerous, interconnected world we can no longer afford to see God's image only in those who are in our image. It will take courageous leadership to remind us that after Babel, to be authentic to one truth does not mean being exclusive of others. A community of communities needs two kinds of religious strength: one to preserve our own distinct traditions, the other to bring them to an enlarged sense of the common good.

Faith persists and in persisting allows us to build a world more human than one in which men, nations or economic systems have become gods. Twenty years ago it seemed as if religion had run its course in the modern world. Today a more considered view would be that its story has hardly yet begun.