

## **Faith and Public Life in a Pluralist Society London Muslim Centre, 28 July 2007**

Thank you for inviting me - I am delighted to be here.

I'm Stephen Timms, Member of Parliament for East Ham, only a few miles from here, and in my Government role I am the new Minister for Competitiveness in the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (which most of you will know as the DTI!).

I want to speak about the challenges both for people of faith and society at large in 21st Century Britain and this is my argument:

1. Faith is alive and here to stay in the modern world;
2. Public Life needs the values contributed by people of faith;
3. BUT - people of faith often find it hard to speak appropriately in the public square; and
4. Faith can, and should be, a source of progressive values and social justice.

### **1. Faith in the modern world**

Sociologists have often argued, mostly from a liberal humanist perspective, that as mankind continues to develop then religion and faith would become an increasingly marginalised, minority pursuit. When I was growing up, the assumption was that faith was on the way out. In 1968, the sociologist Peter Berger, predicted that "[by] the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture".

But it hasn't worked out like that. 30 years later Peter Berger took a different view: *"the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever"*.

That is true in the UK today too. In the 2001 UK census the Government included for the first time a voluntary question on faith. 10% of people declined to answer and another 10% or so said they had no faith. But 78% claimed adherence to a religion - 72% to Christianity and 3% to Islam as the second biggest religion. I was astonished at the time how big that figure was. Some have claimed people must have misunderstood the question. I'm certain they understood it perfectly well!

In Prospect magazine last November the cover story was *"God Returns to Europe: The Slow Death of Secularism"*. The author Eric Kaufmann based his analysis on a demographic fertility advantage of believers over non-believers, which he claimed has been the case going back thousands of years!

Francis Fukuyama famously argued that liberal capitalist democracies are *"the end of history"*. In his book, *"The Dignity of Difference"*, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out:

*"What this overlooked.... is that homo sapiens is not only, or even primarily, a maximising animal, choosing rationally between options. We are uniquely a meaning-asking animal. Our most fundamental questions are Who am I? and To which narrative do I belong? The great hope of the liberal imagination, that*

*politics could be superseded by economics, replacing public good with private choice, was bound to fail because economics as such offers no answer to the big questions of 'Who?' And 'Why?'. Religion does, and that is its power in the contemporary world. The politics of ideology may have died, but it has been replaced not by 'the end of history' but by the politics of identity".*

Kaufmann says: *"as the religious become more conscious of their identity in a secular society, they become more resistant to secularisation."*

People often say that faith is divisive in multi-cultural Britain, that people of different faiths are bound to be in conflict. You don't have to look far to find evidence: Belfast; Bosnia; Baghdad. When I first came to East London thirty years ago to join a church I had got to know as a student, and joined the Labour Party, I was worried that that would prove to be the case.

In practice, I have found the opposite to be true: that in public life, there is a shared basis of values between people of faith, including when the faiths are different, that is a very good basis for working together. People of different faiths can work together more readily in public life than people of faith and of no faith.

Incidentally, the Catholic priest at St Antony's Church Forest Gate told me that his congregation of 1600 people now includes 96 nationalities - which I think means that representatives of most of the countries in the world worship together in that one church. A third of my constituents are Muslims. They come from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, the Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Kosovo and the former Soviet republics. They may at first sight have very little in common - but their faith, which for many is the most important thing about them, is held in common. It is building cohesion between them. And the faiths in practice get on much better between each other than people often think - actually seeing each other as allies.

Faith is here to stay.

## **2. Public Life needs the values often held by people of faith**

People often say you shouldn't mix faith and politics - that is dangerous to do so. My viewpoint is the opposite - that faith is a great starting point for politics.

I received an e-mail from a woman I used to work with, but haven't spoken to for over 15 years. She had come across my website and been reading some of my speeches and wasn't happy. She said:

*"True followers of Jesus pray for [God's] kingdom to put matters right on the earth, they put their faith and trust in God to put matters right and not in earthly governments. Hence, true Christians do not get involved in politics."*

I don't agree. We need the values of faith in creating trust at a time when trust is in short supply. The value of service which is at the heart of faith acts as a strong compulsion to do the right thing, and people know that.

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister published a review of Government policy towards the voluntary and community sector, which was very upfront about the value of the contribution of the faith and community sector. It sets out the aims of the Government's work with them:

- To increase faith communities' contribution to active citizenship and community cohesion;
- To develop their role as agents of change within communities and in wider social action and regeneration.

Faith based charities offer basic social care to the most needy and hard to deal with people in society and in Government we haven't always done enough to thank and champion them. Increasingly Government is seeing these groups as partners to be embraced, rather than as oddities to be kept at a distance.

People of faith believe there is more to life than individual enrichment. And increasingly there is an acknowledgement that there is a link between a person's religious commitment and their own sense of personal fulfilment and happiness. Along with employment, money, family upbringing and relationships, religious commitment is a key indicator of a person's health and well being.

Richard Reeves of the New Economics Foundation has said: *"Given the orthodoxy of the grow-earn-spend philosophy, the case for the church and other religious agencies to act as counter-cultures has never been stronger"*.

In the recent reshuffle the Prime Minister appointed me a Vice-Chair of the Labour Party, with specific responsibility for liaising, on behalf of the party, with faith groups and communities across. I am excited about it and it reflects a recognition in Government that faith is not only not going to go away, but that it is a force for progressive change in our society.

The non believer, Neal Lawson, was right to argue in the Guardian recently that it is today increasingly faith which is the source of moral leadership in our society. And politics needs people of faith to be involved.

### **3. People of faith need to increasingly learn how to speak appropriately in the public square**

So, thirdly, how do people of faith speak into Public Life in an authentic but appropriate way, to contribute to the health and happiness of our society?

Firstly, as people of faith I think we need to be generally more confident than we often are of our right and responsibility to participate in the public square. The vicious secular fundamentalism of writers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens sometimes forces onto the back foot, when in fact we should be a lot more confident of ourselves and the points we want to advance.

It is easy to pillory believers as narrow minded, irrational and exclusive and therefore disqualified from participating in public debate at all.

I welcome the commitment of the Contextual Theology Centre to working together, across the faiths, in causes that we might all have a common approach to. As people of faith, with beliefs that are markedly different, we need to acknowledge difference and distinctiveness, and so contribute more authentically to causes that we all care about. The *"Presence and Engagement"* report from the Church of England's Inter Faith Consultative Group recently makes an important contribution in this area.

So-called "Co-belligerence", based not on a dishonest assumption that people of different religious traditions have no differences or disagreements, but rather

acknowledging where we differ so we can also express clearly where we agree, will enable faith to be taken more, and not less seriously, in the mainstream of modern British life.

And let's not forget that the secular in Europe is historically built upon the religious (and not the other way round).

The *Presence and Engagement* report says this: "[the] quite remarkable and sustained growth in the place of 'Faith' in public policy and discourse... has been encouraged notably by government, particularly in relation to urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal policies". However it has also been noted that "reports on the role of faith groups within civil society consistently draw attention to the particular difficulties such groups have working with ill-informed and often aggressively secular local authorities with short-term funding regimes and burdensome levels of bureaucracy".

There are, however, important practical lessons for people of faith to learn about engagement in the public square and how it is most effectively done; about the content of what is said; its tone; the method and language for speaking; and the timing.

On content, last year Christians demonstrated over the BBC's decision to show "*Jerry Springer: The Opera*" which many claimed dishonoured the person of Christ; Muslims took to the streets over the injury many felt over cartoons of the Prophet, published in Denmark.

It is easy to understand how the non-religious can look at issues like that which seem to motivate us to "action" and find their own preconceptions about religion reinforced rather than challenged. I am not saying that either of the two issues is unimportant, but we should not be known primarily for our anger over injustice done to us, rather for fighting for justice on behalf of others.

In terms of tone, it is much easier to dismiss arguments made by a particular group if they are made in a way which communicates a lack of balance.

Earlier this year we had an important discussion about the *Sexual Orientation Regulations*, and many faith groups made perfectly valid points about their concerns about how the regulations might affect them. Some groups communicated their concerns in a balanced and measured way. Others were much more strident and flamboyant. The former approach I think is the more effective.

When engaging as people of faith, we need to be primarily constructive rather than destructive and always think about how we are being perceived by those we are seeking to persuade.

On "method & language", faith groups do not further their causes when arguments are made in a simplistic and inaccessible way. An obvious example of this would be for a believer engaging in the public square to base his or her primary reasoning on a sacred text and to ignore the need to use what might be termed "public reason" to articulate, argue and defend a position. As Nick Spencer has argued in his excellent publication for the Public Theology think tank, Theos, "*Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*" this does not necessarily mean that it is just the religious who need to be more rigorous about, as he terms it "*showing their workings*" as the accepted "neutral" position and

perceived objectivity of the non-religious arguer needs to be questioned as much as any faith inspired argument. He states that:

*"The fact of public reason, therefore, places two demands on those religious thinkers who wish to participate in the public square. They should be willing to 'accommodate' their language and reasoning to what is currently acknowledged as the norm in public discourse. But they should also be willing to challenge that norm, questioning axioms, confronting arguments and asking all parties, irrespective of their public identities, to justify their faith-based positions."*

And fourthly - timing. We need to work out when it is right to engage and when it is better not to. Sometimes it might be better to keep quiet for a time. This flies in the face of our "immediate" society, but in fact is perhaps another way that people of faith can demonstrate wisdom in pursuing our causes.

There is one other benefit from positive engagement in the public square by faith communities, both for the communities themselves and society at large. It produces a healthy, moderating influence, a seasoning in society; not just a sense of participation amongst those that do get involved, but most importantly in our times, a wider sense of belonging and purpose. The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres made this point in a lecture in Brussels last year, when he said that:

*"The attempt to push faith communities out of the public square not only diminishes their potential contribution to the debate on the values underlying our common life but it is also an unwise and risky strategy. If people of faith are only allowed to speak words of fire among consenting adults then the result will be an increase in fanaticism ... Merely invoking universal principles and ethical generalities does not produce the energy necessary to produce a civilised ethos ... These are times of promise but also peril. Social peace in Europe in the years ahead will depend on how we learn to relate to one another now."*

#### **4. Faith can, and should be, a source of progressive values and social justice**

Fourthly - and finally - faith is a source of progressive values and social justice. We have some great examples. This year we are celebrating the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, as a result of a mass movement within the churches. A Muslim friend of mine was telling me last night how inspired he had been by the film *"Amazing Grace"*, telling the story of William Wilberforce and the great Christian campaign. Faith is a source of progressive values, rather than of bigotry.

It is just not fair to characterise believers as the Guardian journalist Polly Toynbee did in the context of the recent furore over the Sexual Orientation Regulations. She wrote about the faith communities: *"Given an ounce of power they abuse it to deny basic liberties. Last year, they rallied to refuse the right to die with dignity. Now they are back harassing gays."*

We don't have to look back 200 years to see the progressive influence of faith. *"The Make Poverty History"* campaign drew the vast majority of its energy and its fire power from churches and faith groups. 80% of those who turned up to form human chains, who sent letters to their MPs and who lobbied the G8 summit two years ago were from the faith communities. It was people of faith who opened up new space for progressive politics in cancelling the debts owed by the poorest countries, increasing international aid and advocating the millennium

development goals. Without faith, those progressive changes would not have happened.

Indeed Will Hutton, writing in the Observer, a few years ago said:

*"At the end of an increasingly secular century it has been the biblical proof and moral imagination of religion that have torched the principles of the hitherto unassailable citadels of international finance - and opened the way to a radicalism about capitalism whose ramifications are not yet fully understood. ... There is the moral basis for a new social settlement. [Politicians] should take note; it is no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world - it's Leviticus."*

Too often people of faith run away from active engagement with politics for fear of what they believe will be the inevitable compromise of their faith by active participation in one party or another. It is in my view our responsibility to work out faith in the rough and tumble of mainstream party politics, alongside others of other faiths or none.

We celebrated last year the centenary of the establishment of the first Parliamentary Labour Party. In the General Election of 1906, 29 Labour MPs were elected. 18 were committed non-conformist Christians. The most prominent of them was Keir Hardie, who was elected first as MP for West Ham South in 1892 and in 1906 became Leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party. He had become a Christian through the ministry of the great American evangelist D L Moody, and he wrote a few years after 1906: *"The impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement and the inspiration which carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than all other sources combined"*.

The American Christian activist Jim Wallis, in his excellent recent book *God's Politics*, says he searched the whole of the Bible for every reference to the poor, and concluded it is the second most prominent theme in the Old Testament, after idolatry. Faith values should spill into political beliefs and then into political action.

People of faith are able not only to articulate strong beliefs and priorities but often, by virtue of their faith, have the staying power to press on when others might give up. Taking on the big challenges of our time - child poverty in the UK; 80 million children out of school around the world - it means long term commitment, as well as imaginative thinking.

People of faith are often "cut from slightly different cloth" in terms of priorities and attachment to the way the world operates. Wilberforce's righteous anger and deep conviction that the slave trade was an abomination to God drove him to a political radicalism that changed the world for the better.

And, where we see examples of regressive religion - religion being used to divide and rule rather than unite and bind we should not be afraid to confront those in our midst who do not represent the best of our faith traditions. As Jim Wallis also says *"The right response to bad religion is better religion, not secularism"*.

Our priorities - for example, better quality and more affordable housing, decent living standards for all, combating climate change, physical and moral regeneration of our communities - these find expression in many different ways. It may be in community organisations like Telco, for others faith based social

action and social enterprise projects. Yet for others still it will be through involvement in party politics.

As people of faith we need to get our hands dirty and get involved in public life, even party politics. Politics is how big decisions get made. It would be wrong to be left on the sidelines. Faith *is* a great starting point for politics.

## **Conclusion**

So my argument is that:

1. Faith is alive and here to stay in the modern world - the evidence is all around us, not least in this vibrant part of our capital city;
2. that Public Life needs the values contributed by people of faith - the endeavour, the trustworthiness, the care;
3. BUT - people of faith need to increasingly learn how to speak appropriately in the public square - we need to be aware that there are some basic "rules" to be observed and ways of acting that will enhance and not diminish our standing in public life;
4. and finally that Faith can, and should be, a source of progressive values and social justice.

Faith is here to stay, not least in modern, western and "secular" Britain. The plurality of voices in the public square over the next 50 years will be a challenge but also a source of optimism. I hope we will all play our part in working for a positive outcome.

Thank you.