Dialogue with a Secular Culture

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A few weeks ago I noticed on one of the email news services, a two-page article on the existence of God, by a philosopher at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Joel Hodge. I downloaded it to read when I had some spare time, which is what I often do. I am obviously interested in this question because so many people in Australian society today take it for granted that sensible people do not believe in the existence of God. To my horror I discovered I was downloading from "The Drum", an ABC blog, and so was also downloading all the comments that were put on the blog in response to the piece by Joel Hodge; and I did not know how to stop the printing.

In total I had 55 pages. I skimmed through about 30 of these and while many of the comments were put there by the same people who seemed to be in constant dialogue with each other, in those first 30 pages I only noticed one comment that supported Joel Hodge in his belief in God. Some others tried hard to be clever at the expense of the author and their responses ranged from the serious to disdain for anyone who would hold such a position.

This example is fairly typical of our Australian society today. To put it simply, we live in a secular culture. I could regale you for a long time with anecdotes about how prevalent and how definitive the secular world view is in our culture, and you may have your own to share, but I will offer only one other very recent example. One of our diocesan pastoral workers was preparing a couple for marriage and asked them why they wanted a Catholic wedding. The bride-to-be said it was because she was Catholic. When the male party was asked why he wanted a Catholic wedding he said that he did not really want one because religion was for weak people. He repeated this quite seriously somewhat to the chagrin of his Catholic partner. Obviously they had not dealt with this rather fundamental issue. I simply tell the story to illustrate how normal it is now for someone to say in a Church context that they consider religion to be ridiculous.

Pope Benedict on his first annual holidays as pope went to Aosta where he used to holiday from Germany. I think he may have even holidayed there with his family. It is in Northern Italy. During his holidays he gave a talk to the priests of the diocese. He said that the so-called great Churches seem to be dying. This is true, he said, in Europe, not so much in the United States, but particularly in Australia. He explained that the world seems to have reached the stage that people no longer see any evidence of the need for God, let alone Jesus Christ. Christian life

becomes a subjective choice, and so an arbitrary choice. Science is the only model of knowledge, everything else is subjective. Therefore it is very difficult to believe and very difficult to offer one's life to the Christian cause.

There was vigorous reaction in Australia to his comment that it was here that the inroads of the secular culture upon the Church had been most devastating. I was not perturbed because whether Australia is the worst case or not, it is certainly in very serious trouble. I am not sure whether the Holy Father changed his mind about Australia after seeing such lively faith manifest in the streets of Sydney during World Youth Day, and clearly his observations were specifically about the Western world. One only needs to travel to Asia, or apparently even more so to Africa, to see that people are deeply religious and that their spirituality has to be taken for granted in dealing with any major social questions on those continents.

Maybe the Western world is out of step; but maybe also it is in a less parlous state than some triumphant secularists might believe. When I was a seminarian, Peter Berger was the sociologist who captured people's imaginations with his description of a world rapidly secularizing and the end of religion as we knew it. In 1999 he seemed to have changed his mind. He wrote then that "the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false: the world today, with some exceptions ….. is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some cases more so than ever." Clearly, he was not referring to Australia but to other parts of the world. The examples that are usually put forward to prove his argument are the rise of Pentecostalism around the world and the revival of Islam.

Pope Benedict himself, when speaking at a Wednesday Audience last year on St Thomas Aquinas, said that our own age marked by secularism, rationalism and an apparent eclipse of God is showing signs of a renewed religious sense, and the recognition of the inadequacy of a purely horizontal, material vision of life. "Man is made in the image of God; his desire for God is present in every human heart and man in some way knows that he is capable of speaking to God in prayer", he said. (Wednesday Audience, May 11, 2011.)

Again, I am not sure that this is as obvious in Australia. Many speak in Australia of the chasm between religion and spirituality. While the younger generations often reject religion and do not expect to find anything worthwhile in religion, they are said to be on a spiritual quest and hungry for transcendence and meaning. I remain unconvinced that this is universal. My experience is that many young Australians do not look much beyond a career, shopping, the barbeque and a beer with their mates. If they have experiences of the mystery of life and pointers to transcendence, they appear to dismiss them and move back to the shopping, the barbeque or the beer with mates as if these are all they really expect from life.

In a secular culture such as ours when secularists can sometimes be quite militant, there are many ways in which the Church might be tempted to respond. In looking for the right strategy it could do well to listen to what Pope Paul VI wrote in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, during the Second Vatican Council. We will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Council's beginning in October this year. Many commentators suggest that what he wrote then had a significant influence upon the Council itself.

The Church in Europe was already confronting a secular culture in the nineteen-sixties. So, in *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI was already addressing the question that perhaps the Church is only now facing in Australia. He suggested that there are many different ways that the Church can respond to such a secular culture. Firstly, it could withdraw within itself and reduce all its contacts to a minimum so that in isolating itself from secular society it would thereby protect itself. Secondly, in observing the evils in secular society, it could condemn them publicly and take up a kind of "crusade" against their prevalence in secular society. Thirdly, it could seek to take over secular society and as it were, create a theocracy whereby the Church was the dominant force and could lay down the law to control what was happening in society. A lesser version of this was described and rejected by Pope Benedict in *Deus Caritas Est* when writing about the social doctrine of the Church:

It has no intention of giving the church power over the state. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just.

Or fourthly, it could enter into dialogue with it.

When he used the word "dialogue" he most often used a Latin word "*colloquium*" which means an exchange, a conversation, a meeting of minds and hearts, as opposed to "*dialogus*" which refers to a formal intellectual exchange perhaps between experts and is the way we would often use the word. In his encyclical he called for four concentric circles of dialogue: with the world, with other believers, with other Christians and with other Catholics. The dialogue was always to be a dialogue of salvation, meaning the Church always has something to say, something to offer, which is the gift of salvation; but the way to say it and the way to offer it is through dialogue. He pointed to God's initiative of entering into dialogue with us, addressing us and inviting us to respond. As St John wrote, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

Paul VI also believed that dialogue was the way forward given the nature of society today, its pluralism, and the greater intellectual maturity of people today. Also, it would express the esteem for the dignity of other

people that the Church has and avoid the Church approaching others with bigotry or prejudice, hostility or boastfulness. Ultimately he saw dialogue as the way of making spiritual contact with others.

Pope John Paul II in his 1985 encyclical on Christian Unity, *Ut Unum Sint*, wrote specifically of dialogue in an ecumenical context. Interestingly, he wrote that dialogue was consistent with the personalist way of thinking of contemporary society, and that dialogue is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realization, both of the individual and of the human community. He did not see it as purely cognitive, though the intellectual dimension was essential to it. "It involves the human subject in his or her entirety; dialogue between communities involves in a particular way the subjectivity of each, and it is always more than an exchange of ideas, it involves an exchange of gifts". In 1999 he went further in recommending dialogue on a broader scale by saying "for the ecclesial community, the method of dialogue is becoming the way in which to work to bring the Lord's comforting message of salvation everywhere."

Pope Benedict, in an address at Belem Cultural Center in Lisbon, Portugal, in May 2010, spoke similarly quoting *Ecclesiam Suam* that "the church must enter into dialogue with the world in which she lives. The church becomes word, she becomes message, she becomes dialogue (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 67). Dialogue without ambiguity and marked by respect for those taking part is a priority in the world and the church does not intend to withdraw from it."

Pope Benedict has further developed the Church's reflections on dialogue by inaugurating what he has called "the Courtyard of the Gentiles", in Paris in May last year. The "courtyard" is a reference to the outer area of the Temple in Jerusalem where the gentiles who were interested in the one God of the Jews could gather. They were not Jews and they could not enter the Temple, but they were interested and so had a space where they could draw close. Benedict has suggested that the Church create such a space for secular people today, because while they are not part of any religion, they long for a better world, a world that is peaceful, happy and freer, and this gives grounds for the Church to enter into conversation with them.

At the same time he asked for a mutuality in this relationship; "religions have nothing to fear from a just secularity, one that is open and allows individuals to live in accordance with what they believe in their own consciences. If we are to build a world of liberty, equality and fraternity, then believers and non-believers must be free to be just that, equal in their right to live as individuals and in community in accord with their convictions and fraternal in their relations with one another." In such a relationship, he believes non-believers will offer us a challenge, the challenge to live in a way that is consistent with the faith we profess, and which rejects any distortion of religion which would make it unworthy of

human beings. He went further in an address last year when he said: "Agnostics who are constantly exercised by the question of God, those who long for a pure heart but suffer on account of our sin … are closer to the Kingdom of God than believers whose life of faith is 'routine' and who regard the Church merely as an institution, without letting their hearts be touched by faith." I am not sure that the more aggressive secularists in Australian society are willing to grant to religion this equality, freedom and respect, or to enter into this dialogue just yet, though they are often ready to offer their critique.

Dialogue presupposes a commitment to both truth and respect for the other. A commitment to truth will set limits to the acceptance of diverse opinions or values. A respect for others will value differences and find something of the truth in the opinions and values of others. Dialogue also presupposes both openness and fidelity. Anyone engaged in authentic dialogue must be faithful to what they believe and to their own identity. To that extent they are required, if needs be, to be counter-cultural. Openness, on the other hand, requires that one recognize the different contexts from which people are speaking. It acknowledges the validity of different perspectives. It is self-critical and not just critical of the other. Genuine dialogue cannot occur if one is only faithful and committed to the truth, or if one is only open and respectful of others. Authentic dialogues require openness and faithfulness, truthfulness and respect for others.

Alternative stances towards the other can be described with a cluster of verbs. On one hand one can confront, convict, confute, controvert and condemn. On the other one can concede, conform, condone, collude and compromise. In between the two one can confer, converse, conciliate and converge. Ideally, if one's dialogue is a dialogue of salvation, one can convince and even at times convert.

Unfortunately, the first two clusters of verbs describe the extreme positions taken towards secular culture by members of the Catholic community. Some are only willing to convict and condemn, to confront and confute, and others appear all too willing to concede, conform, condone, collude and compromise.

Even when some members of the community are not accurately described by these respective clusters of verbs, they are sometimes criticized by others in the Catholic community as if they were. Dialogue presumes a willingness to confer and converse, perhaps to converge and ideally to convince and convert. However, this does not mean that there are not times when one must confront or condemn, and to controvert and to confute. And, on the other hand, there are times when one must concede that one has erred and to accept legitimate criticism from the other, and even to conform to acceptable and generally accepted norms of behaviour. It is hard to see though that one could be loyal to one's

Catholic faith if one were to collude, condone or compromise one's identity in attempting to conform to the expectations of a secular culture.

In his historic address on September 17, 2010 in Westminster Hall, London, where he spoke to representatives of British society including the diplomatic corps, politicians, academics and business leaders, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged St Thomas More whom he called "the great English scholar and statesman, who is admired by believers and non-believers alike for the integrity with which he followed his conscience, even at the cost of displeasing the sovereign whose 'good servant' he was, because he chose to serve God first."

He took this example of St Thomas More as the starting point for a reflection upon the place of religious belief in the political process. Later in his address he expressed the belief that the fundamental questions at stake in the trial of St Thomas More are still real today, such as the requirements that governments can reasonably impose upon citizens and their extent, and the authority for solving moral dilemmas in contemporary society. He argued that if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are no more solid than social consensus, then democracy is a very fragile reality indeed. It would lead to pragmatic short-term solutions which interestingly he saw well-illustrated by the then very recent global financial crisis. The lack of an agreed, solid, ethical foundation for economic activity surely contributed to that crisis which caused such enormous suffering.

On the other hand he suggested that the British Parliament's historic abolition of the slave trade is an example of a decision by politicians based upon shared ethical principles rooted in natural law. This led him to draw some very interesting conclusions which I would like to share with you:

The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles. This "corrective" role of religion vis-à-vis reason is not always welcomed, though, partly because distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, can be seen to create serious social problems themselves. And in their turn, these distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion. It is a two-way process. Without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a

partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person. Such misuse of reason, after all, was what gave rise to the slave trade in the first place and to many other social evils, not least the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.

He argued that religion ought to be a vital contributor to the national conversation, and went on to express his concern about the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance. He pointed to the problem that we often face here in Australia that some seem to think it is legitimate to silence the public voice of religion or relegate it to the private sphere. He went on to cite as examples the opposition to public celebrations of Christmas and so on. He concluded by calling everyone to seek ways of promoting and encouraging dialogue between faith and reason at every level of national life, because they need each other. His view would be supported by the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, a non-believer, with whom he has sometimes engaged in dialogue, and who was recently quoted by Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard: "The liberal state depends in the long run on mentalities that it cannot produce from its own resources".

I think Pope Benedict sketched out here the foundations for a dialogue between the Church and representatives of a secular culture, between Catholics or Christians and non-believers. He accepted criticism but also offered it in a respectful way and hoped for a real mutuality. Without mutual respect real dialogue is not possible. I fear we are struggling to establish such a foundation of respect here in Australia. We appear more to be manning the barricades at times.

During that same visit to Britain, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi who recently visited Australia, spoke at the gathering of interreligious leaders. He quoted John Henry Cardinal Newman who had only been beatified by Pope Benedict the year before: "We should ever conduct ourselves towards our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend". He then went on to quote Pope Benedict himself in *Caritas in Veritate*: "the development of peoples depends …. on a recognition that the human race is a single family, working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side-by-side".

His own description of the contribution of religion to civil society which he delivered in Assisi in October this year at the Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World presided over by Pope Benedict XVI, is very beautiful and I would like to share it with you as well:

In the face of a deeply individualistic culture, we offer community. Against consumerism, we talk about the things that have a value but not a price. Against cynicism we dare to admire and respect. In the face of fragmenting families, we believe in consecrating relationships. We believe in marriage as a commitment, parenthood as a responsibility, and the poetry of everyday life when it is etched in homes and schools with the charisma of holiness and grace.

In our communities we value people not for what they earn or what they buy or how they vote but for who they are, every one of them a fragment of the Divine presence. We hold life holy. And each of us is lifted by the knowledge that we are part of something greater than all of us, that created us in forgiveness and love. Each of us in our own way is a guardian of values that are in danger of being lost in our short-attention-span, hyperactive, information-saturated, wisdom-starved age. And though our faiths are profoundly different, yet we recognise in one another the presence of faith itself, that habit of the heart that listens to the music beneath the noise, and knows that God is the point at which soul touches soul and is enlarged by the presence of otherness.

This is one description of the gift we can bring even to our very secular Australian culture. Our challenge is to be what we are called to be and then to find ways of enabling this gift to be recognized rather than the caricature of ourselves that is so often rejected.

In his most recent book *The Great Partnership. God, Science and the Search for Meaning*, Jonathan Sacks quoted Isaiah Berlin to the effect that few things have done more harm in the world than the belief on the part of individuals or groups such as churches that they are in *sole* possession of the truth, and that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad and therefore needing to be restrained or suppressed.

Sacks believes such an attitude can be found among new atheists and religious fundamentalists. Both of these groups can be dangerously wrong because they fail to see, as he said, that there are “thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird”, or “more than one cognitive frame through which to understand and engage with reality”. His example to illustrate this point is the very fact that the Bible begins with two different accounts of creation in the Book of Genesis.

The scientist who denies spirituality or the religious person who denies the findings of science has failed in understanding. Sacks himself argued for a “strong, vigorous, challenging dialogue” between religion and science on the massive problems confronting humanity. They need each other if they are to avoid hubris and intellectual imperialism. As he said in Sydney in January, “Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. That’s it. And you need both.”

This is not unlike the constant argument of Pope Benedict of the critical, purifying role reason and religion have in relation to each other. "Bad things happen when religion ceases to hold itself answerable to empirical reality, when it creates devastation and cruelty on earth for the sake of salvation in heaven. And bad things happen when science declares itself the last word on the human condition and engages in social or bio-engineering, treating humans as objects rather than as subjects, and substituting cause and effect for reflection, will and choice".

The Pope and the Rabbi are spiritual and academic giants who urge the Church and religious believers to dialogue, as did Pope Paul VI in the nineteen-sixties. Dialogue ought to be their chosen path when it is possible and it should be what the Church always wants to offer even to those who appear to be its enemies. There will be times when it must confront and perhaps condemn, but there will never be times when religious believers ought compromise if it places their faith or their identity at risk. They should never descend to the rude and crude polemics of St Thomas More which were the norm in his day, and which are rather shocking to read today. Rather, they should emulate his good-humoured, expansive humanity which so won the hearts of his contemporaries and which is the best foundation for any dialogue. If they do that then perhaps they might convince some, even convert others and help some to hear "the music beneath the noise", and to discover the poetry to be found in everyday life and even God who is the point at which soul touches soul.