

## Lent Talks 2008 – 4 ‘The exodus from the churches’

Many people are said to be searching for deeper meaning in their lives. Most big book stores these days carry a big stock of religious publications. Introductions to world faiths, biography, spiritual teachings, arguments for or against religion. In the same section well stocked shelves on magic and the occult , also healing, meditation, psychology, self-improvement techniques are to be found. It reflects the image of modern culture as containing a supermarket of religions.

By contrast, Christian bookshops have their more specialised range of liturgical books, bible commentaries, and popular works of pastoral theology, devotion or spiritual biography, and struggle to remain viable. Their trade is hit by internet retailing, but even more by the decline of interest in, and commitment to church, expressed in the mainstream community of faith that worships God on Sundays. In 1850, one in two of the population attended church on Sunday and over 98% would have called themselves Christian. 50% of the present population still call themselves Anglican, 69% Christian and 6% of other faiths. Today it's just one in twenty-five are regular worshippers. Attenders admit they don't go as often as they used to, due to change in lifestyle. All in all, the absence of people from regular acts worship is a strong statement about life today.

Nobody is compelled any more to attend out of habit forged by conformity.

Nobody is persecuted if they don't turn up. Making the effort can be a hindrance, if lifestyle or location, or even finding a service is problematic. Ultimately, effort relies on motivation. Fewer people than ever feel driven by inner need to ensure they attend a worship service regularly. At the same time, half the population claim to pray and/or meditate regularly – for the most part alone. What kind of prayer they make, whether others would recognise themselves as doing the same thing, is little tested. For decades, religion has been pushed to the edge of public life, despite grand ceremonies for occasions of state or celebrity culture. Prime Ministers ‘don't do God’ , reluctant to bring personal faith out of the domestic closet There are slots for state religious ceremony expressing grief,

thanksgiving, remembrance, major anniversaries, but that's all.

At one time civic religion was the preserve of the Church of England. In the late twentieth century, ecumenical guests and then participants became the norm. In the twenty-first century, inter-faith guests and participants are rapidly shaping a new norm. Even civic religion is changing. The Queen as Defender of the Faith expresses her Christian faith and valued all citizens' faith contributions to the common good of society in her Christmas podcast this year.

Secularising humanists have for the past century, but now with increasingly strident voices sought to exclude religion from all public affairs, always citing the divisions and damage attributable to religious forces at work.

The influx of other faiths over the past half century has brought us citizens who are surprised that religious diversity should have become an excuse for avoiding particular religious observances in the public on the grounds that it's offensive to other religions. Not so, they say, having for the most part originated in societies which were multi-faith for centuries.

Religious communities, have mostly learned to respect each other and live with differences, if only by keeping a respectful distance and attempting tolerance. If there is inter-communal conflict, it's rooted in social and economic injustices.

Politically active people fusing the promotion of their cause with the defence of their religious identity. Ignoring or suppressing religion does nothing to address the cause of conflict. The deeper the faith commitment of a religious community, the more it strives to work for reconciliation, justice and peace, resisting (to its own detriment if needs be) being exploited for political advantage by anyone.

The secularist agenda seems to promote rational debate and decision, with the elimination of religion as a means to an end. In effect, this reduces people's freedom to believe, think, act and criticise, openly and publicly, issues which are difficult to resolve because of differences in views and values. Abortion and sexual identity are two such issues attracting opposing views from believers and non-believers alike. Secularists assert that religion contributes nothing of value

to the debate, and may even hinder debate and therefore should be excluded. For decades many religious communities have hardly dared to answer back, dared to be different, but rather clung to their positions, voicing their thoughts privately, or else stating their positions openly without debating properly, at the risk of not being taken seriously.

Times are changing, the presence of large numbers of people of other faith communities, some highly educated, articulate about their faith, is having a fresh impact, affirming the religious contribution to the public domain, arguing for what the old British establishment has hung on to nervously, boosting confidence.

We're currently in the throes of a re-appraisal of the role of religions in public life and thought, as seen from recent parliamentary debate.

We have practising Jews and Muslims saying openly how much they appreciate the freedom to practice their faiths and living in a society where Christians freely and unapologetically celebrate their festivals too. On the other hand, we also have Jews, Muslims and Christians who freely admit they don't put faith in God as their spiritual tradition requires, but place a high value on custom, story, culture which their religious heritage contributes to both family, community and national unity. It's another indication that common prayer and worship has been displaced as a social component of personal spiritual life. This is what happens when all are free to do what is right in their own eyes and there's no sanction for doing your own thing, as long as you don't do evil to others.

The ancient prophets castigated those who performed religious ritual yet behaved immorally, unjustly to others. Doing the truth is both personal and it connects us to others. The search to discern and do what is right cannot be done alone and in a vacuum. We need learning, enquiry, dialogue with others. Worship endeavours to take seriously together all that is of ultimate concern and value, celebrating what is good, holy, pure and true. It opens heart and mind to the Word of God in sacred scripture, and acts of sharing to bring participants to the threshold of a shared personal encounter with God. Although what each

individual experiences may be different, its outcome is something shared which needs to be taken into account. If it's only an awareness of the frail limits of our humanity face to face with the infinite and eternal – something forgettable when we're caught up in the importance of our own thoughts and ambitions, it gives us perspective on ourselves. So why do so many take less opportunity to do this? Mainstream traditional churches have declined to the point where institutional frameworks are collapsing, no longer able to provide for the faithful as they have done in the past. New religious movements, evangelical and Pentecostal claim great success in converting non-believers, and in picking up casualties from mainstream churches, unable to find a worship experience that fits their need. Yet, overall, total regular attendance still declines across Western Europe. The recent influx into Britain of Eastern European migrants, who are practising worshippers, has helped mask the severity of the decline in indigenous Catholic attendance. Migrants of all religions, after the first generation tend to adopt the habits of the local populace. Falling away from the worship habit, if not from distinct cultural identification, is the long term trend. It is also a feature of Muslim and Hindu adherents growing up in Britain now.

Wherever community is weakened by poverty, exclusion or injustice, alienation of migrants can be the seedbed of conservative religious extremism or secular criminality. Even healthy faith communities find it harder than ever to retain the upcoming generations and help them keep faith and traditional cultural values. Fervour of spirit and strong commitment to paths of faith has never been without variability in the history of religions. Revivals have come and gone. Institutions and communities have marked time and seemed all but dead, but then revived and reformed themselves. This doesn't happen in a vacuum. Social or economic conditions provide an environment for growth or decline. Modern material wealth has certainly been a feature of countries where religion has declined or is static. Poor third world countries have seen resurgence in Islam and expansion of Christianity at the expense of indigenous faiths. People seem more religious in

the USA, where religion is associated with belonging, building community and social welfare in a highly mobile society. However, even in the States there are signs of decline in religious adherence, rather than growth.

People in wealthy countries now have greater leisure time for themselves and more choice about how to use it. Nowadays that means more choice of what to do to nourish the inner life. Therapies, self improvement techniques, a whole range of religious choices are available. People only commit themselves to what delivers something for them, once traditional loyalties to worshipping community have been loosened by mobility and migration.

If people return to religion during war or recession, it may be their expectations of life have been overturned – whether by bereavement, job loss, illness, or divorce – when the usual diet of choices, the habitual timetable is inaccessible, inner emptiness is exposed. Do people then return to prayer and worship? Only if and when it meets real spiritual need – and often it no longer does.

Only those expressions of religious faith that genuinely feed hungry souls and make a difference to the way life is lived will survive the present abandonment of the public worship habit. It's hard for people to say what really meets their need. Missionary entrepreneurs are keen to innovate, experiment and promote the latest music and forms of social interaction in worship, but it's all a trial and error process, with much disappointment if you don't find what you need. Believers are used to being told what they want, not encouraged to explore or ask. Yet, in the course of time, what seems unchanging does in fact change, or die.

Votive candles and prayers for the dead, and ancient forms of ritual abandoned by Protestantism have all made a comeback, by popular request. Worship is now done in a less formal way. Retreats have become a popular past-time for seekers of faith, showing how much people need silence, slowness, beauty and intimacy. Pilgrimage, 'spiritual tourism' is now a main feature of the global travel market – people seeking experiences of the sacred in the beauty of holiness.

All this has its effect on what churches offer to their clientele. Whatever helps to

reconcile people with God, to renew their faith in the light of new experience will find acceptance eventually. Yet the priority for committed faithful is more often retaining and maintaining churches, to ensure there is a sacred place where worship can happen of whatever kind.

It's important to faith in the future that we are open to things becoming very different indeed, in fidelity to the call to be a place of prayer, care and spiritual welcome. Churches only seem to be fixed well regulated edifices. Over time they change as people and society changes. The mediaeval St John's had a rood screen and side chapels till the reformation. The Georgian furnishings gave way to a choir, and galleries were constructed in the 1820s, then torn down in the 1890s when outer aisles were added. The Pace vestry was inserted in the 1970s and now we're on the verge of another make-over, to keep us at the forefront of hospitality to all who visit our church, regardless of faith or origin in this global tourist era. With this change in environment, people, opportunities, the worship offered will also evolve in response to the need to make worship a living life-enhancing experience. Will regular, committed worshippers return? And if they do, will we be prepared for the fact that they aren't like us and need different things from the same experience of gathering together to pray? Facing this, step at a time, is part of our pilgrimage, today and tomorrow. The future may turn out to be deeply different, discontinuous with the present, as happened when churches reformed themselves back in the sixteenth century. People may continue to be less conventionally religious in their practices, but this doesn't mean to say that they can't or won't grow in grace and holiness. Already 63 years ago, Boenhoffer spoke about 'worldly holiness', 'religionless Christianity'. In the future these ideas may take a recognisable shape in our life together.