Religion and Secularism in a Global Age

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Tony Blair Faith Foundation

Concluding Remarks

I have been asked to provide a few concluding remarks, from the point of view of a diplomat. In a way, I am the right choice, as a representative of a largely secular society, accredited to and engaged with the global government of one of the world's great faiths.

This week I was at another event, hosted by the Spanish Embassy, as part of a series called 'Conversations in the Palace of Spain'. The theme of that discussion was "Religion and the Public Square". It is no coincidence that we are debating these issues constantly at the moment. Nor that it was an essential theme of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, who stepped down yesterday. It is, increasingly, becoming one of the essential themes of our time.

One of the key addresses of his Pontificate was the great speech at Westminster Hall on Friday 17 September 2010. In that speech, Pope Benedict addressed head on the question of the relationship between religion and the secular world, the dialogue between faith and reason. He did so not in terms of conflict – the framework of today's debate – but in terms of resolution, arguing that the dialogue between faith and reason is crucial not just to our comprehension of the world in which we live, but also a critical element in any potential solution to the existential crisis being suffered by the post-modern world.

I quote a few lines, where the Pope addressed the moral and ethical underpinning religion can provide to political discourse:

This 'corrective' role of religion vis-a-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 20th 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 civilisation.

To this dialogue, we might also add the dialogue between religions conducted within the boundaries of the secular state, as noted by Professor Bhargava when discussing the experience of India.

Modern, secular liberal democracy can sit uneasily with tradition, and history. One of the valid critiques of modern, western-style secularism, it seems to me, is that it is not just ahistorical, but anti-historical. One doesn't have to look very far to see examples. Perhaps the most spectacular was the debate over the preamble to the European Union constitution, and whether or not it should have made mention of Europe's Christian roots. The concept of judicial "neutrality" towards religion also strikes me as strange, given the need for any judicial system – and certainly the common law – to be embedded in the society which it serves, not an abstraction of it. Dialogue between the secular and religious worlds helps us to recall our roots, improves our understanding of whence we came, and can provide pointers to the paths we ought to follow in the future.

The global perspective of this conference, both in the morning and afternoon sessions, has I think been critical. And it is a welcome corrective to the Rome-centric view. Hearing viewpoints from and about debates in India, North Africa, France, Turkey, North America, in the wider Islamic or Christian worlds, reminds us that the interaction between the religious and secular worlds is a global issue. Although there are many different religious and secular traditions – something of which we have also been reminded today – many of the debates, the tensions, the issues and the creative solutions can be shared with profit. And there is not just one model. As we have heard in the case of India and Turkey, there is not just one model of a secular, sometimes called aconfessional, state, and laicite is not necessarily anti-religious or even religion-neutral; it can even take a positive stance towards the role of religion in society, or hold the ring between different faiths in society.

This conference has offered us the prism of the danger of conflict between the religious and secular world views. Personally, I prefer to focus not just on the resolution or avoidance of those potential conflicts, but on exploring how we can bring faith and reason together to strengthen our judicial, social, constitutional or political discourse, as Pope Benedict said, "for the good of civilisation". One example is the field of human rights. I think it is right to argue that the modern concept of human rights and equality flow directly from the dialogue between faith and reason – if you like, the dignity of the human formed in God's image, meeting the enlightenment individual throwing off his chains. Daniel Cere touched on this morning in his discussion about the role of the state and faith in relation to human sexuality.

As a diplomat, this joint encounter today with religion and the academic world represents a wonderful opportunity. If diplomats do not continue to update their understanding of the world around them, we become redundant. In the same way that a diplomat who fails to engage with the new media – preferring old fashioned press releases – cannot possibly connect with the contemporary world, and therefore is failing to do his job, so too a diplomat that does not keep abreast of the information available at the interface between the academic world and global developments. I believe that this is particularly valid for those of us engaged in the debate on religion and foreign policy, where this – at the same time – ancient and modern driving and motivating force of humanity and human action, faith, is shaping the societies and polities with which we interact. We have heard about two very clear examples of this today. Dr Boubekeur explained the complexities of the realities of Islamism in North Africa, and the foreign policy challenge that represents to foreign diplomats. And we have also heard about the role of religion in the construction of local democracies in Afghanistan, one of our great foreign policy priorities.

In 2010, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs established a task force on religion and the making of foreign policy. Its basic conclusion was that the correct foreign policy response to faith is to engage effectively with religion and religious communities, including when religious actors disagree with the state. The influence of religious groups and thinkers around the world; the political impact of changing patterns of religious identification; the role of globalisation in transforming religion; the legitimacy and public role played by religion where governments can lack it in different economic and political circumstances; the misuse of religion, especially by extremists; and the deepening significance of religious freedom – and the developing concept of freedom of religious conscience – as we discuss universal human rights, are all issues with which the modern diplomat has to grapple. In other words, understanding the religious make-up of a state and foreign policy actors is not an option but an essential component of effective diplomacy. It may seem obvious sitting here in Rome. But, until quite recently, most diplomats would have argued the opposite. Madeleine Albright once complained that:

"I had an entire bureau of economic experts I could turn to and a cadre of experts on non-proliferation and arms control ... With the notable exception of the Ambassador for international religious freedom, I did not have similar expertise available for integrating religious principles into our efforts at diplomacy."

A proper understanding of the relationship between religion and the secular can also help us avoid stereotypes, and today's conference has, I think, done a great deal of implicit and useful stereo-type bashing. One of my favourites is the implied, and sometimes openly expressed view that Muslims in Britain are, at least potentially, intrinsically disloyal to the nation and the state – rather, it must be said, as Catholics were perceived by many in the British establishment in the 18th and 19th centuries. And yet a recent survey found that 87% of Muslims in Britain feel a strong sense of belonging, 83% are proud to be British citizens, and 77% strongly identify with Britain, while only 50% of the wider public did so. As a British government official, I'd like to ask the question: not, "what are we doing wrong in our efforts to instil British identity amongst the wider public?", but "what are we doing right with British Muslims, and how can this provide us with lessons for our policies with others"? an intelligent dialogue between faith and reason should be able to help us here, and in so many other areas of public policy.

It seems to me that it is incumbent upon governments to take up Benedict XVI's challenge: to "enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue", to understand religion better, the relations between religions, to engage with them, to find out how far faith and reason, faith and faith, the secular and religious worlds, can be brought together to ensure – if not constant harmony – then at least that the inevitable tensions between them can be creative, not conflictual.

I am delighted that today's conference run by the Tony Blair Faith foundation, in partnership with the Pontifical Gregorian University and the American University in Rome, has also been placed within the context of the extraordinary debates and dialogues run under the auspices of the Courtyard of the Gentiles; a great and important project, launched by Pope Benedict, and now entrusted to the capable and dynamic energies of Cardinal Ravasi and

the Pontifical Council for Culture. It has been a pleasure for the British Embassy to be able to contribute to this significant encounter of the spiritual and secular realms, as expressed by Cardinal Ravasi this afternoon. There should, and I trust there will, be more. I am sure that we are not at the end of this particular journey.