



Christianity and Public Life: Speaking for God in a Secular Society

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The relationship between Christianity and the public realm is a highly controversial subject, about which people are highly suspicious and on which they have strong opinions. I understand those suspicions. If someone says, 'Christ came to save humanity', you may have difficulty making sense of it, or you may disagree with it, but you would recognize it as a Christian statement; a proclamation that you rightly expect the church to make. If a church leader says, 'Trident should not be replaced', you may agree with it, but you might understandably not regard it as a distinctively Christian position. It might be held by people with a range of religious and non-religious perspectives on life. So, the suspicion is that if a church leader pronounces on some aspect of public life it might be just his personal view, or the view of a particular section of society; and you wonder whether there is any integral connection between the policy so advocated and the Christian faith.

The late Enoch Powell, who was converted to the Christian faith from atheism as an adult, and who was a serious biblical scholar, put the issue starkly when he said that the teaching of Jesus was inward, individual and eschatological, and defeated every attempt to get a political policy from it. There is some truth in that view, which I will be considering later, and which is why we have the suspicion that I mentioned. Nevertheless, his conclusion is false. I hope to show that we can legitimately try to achieve a public policy that has an integral connection to the Christian faith, albeit on particular issues there will still sometimes be scope for some disagreement.

For nearly three centuries the church was a small, spasmodically persecuted sect in the Roman Empire. Its main concern was the quality of its own life, both that of its individual members, and the face it presented corporately to the world. Nevertheless, it had to have some attitude to the political structures of the time, and the New Testament makes it clear what that was to be. Writing towards the end of the First Century or the beginning of the second, the writer of the first letter to Timothy put it this way:

'First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for sovereigns and for all in high office so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life, free to practice our religion with dignity.' (1 Timothy 2, 1-2)

That could not be clearer. They simply wanted to be left alone so that they could worship God in peace and witness to the faith without being harassed. That has been the attitude of many Christians since, sometimes because the government has been hostile to the church, as in the Soviet Union, and sometimes as a matter of Christian policy, as with sects like the Plymouth Brethren.

After the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the 4th century the church achieved a position of power, and its relationship to the state became very different, too close many would say. Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, and Constantine was seen as God's Vice-regent on

earth. But for the purposes of my theme, I need to jump straight from there to the opening paragraph of A.J.P. Taylor's history of the first half of the twentieth century. There he wrote:

'Until August 1914, a sensible law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the State, beyond the post office and policeman. All this was changed by the impact of the Great War.' [1]

'All this was changed.' The state now dominates our lives in a way it did not before. In particular the state has become the monopoly provider in areas where previously the church had the major responsibility, education, social welfare and health.[2]

For most of the church's history it was possible for Christians to show their love for their neighbour either by individual acts of kindness, or by getting together with others to found schools, hospitals, hospices, orphanages and so on. The witness of the church in these fields down the ages has been impressive. But how can someone care about their neighbour today without being concerned about the public policies which affect so much of their lives, either for good or ill? Love of neighbour today has an inescapable political dimension. To think we can love our neighbours without being concerned about the political policies which shape their lives is to live in unreality.

That does not of course answer the question about what that love of neighbour entails in terms of political policies; it simply opens the question up. It also poses further questions about what the church should say and how it should say it. But this presupposes a prior issue about the kind of society we now find ourselves in. People talk about living in a secular society or a secular age. The title of this chapter is 'Speaking for God in a secular age', so let me begin by trying to think as clearly as possible about the concept of the secular.

First we must distinguish between a secular age and a secular society. The first term, a secular age, is a description of the kind of society we live in. The second, a secular society is put forward as a model for the relationship our political structures should have to religion.

I will take the concept of a secular age first. In the 1960's it was argued by some that the West was in the process of an irreversible process of secularization. Then people began to ask rather more critical questions about the kind of criteria that might be used to judge this. It was pointed out that France, for example, had some 40,000 professional fortune tellers, more than there were priests; hardly a sign of a secular society. This then there has been lively and often better focused debate with either the 18th century or the 1960's seen as the key period of change in the direction of secularization.

Charles Taylor in his book *A secular Age* [3] which won the Templeton prize contrasts life in 1500 with life today. In 1500 belief in God was the unquestioned assumption behind the whole of life, political and personal. Today that is no longer the case. Taylor does not believe that religious faith will become ever more marginal. What he says is that today the Christian faith is one option amongst others. Furthermore, at least in the circles where many Christians move, they have to argue for the truth of their faith against the prevailing zeitgeist which assumes the opposite. I recognize the description that Taylor gives and believe that it is an accurate one of the kind of society in which we now live. It is important to note that Taylor does not think Christianity untrue, indeed he himself is a believer, nor does he think it will die out, but we do live in a secular age, in his sense of the term, compared with for example the year 1500. Our fundamental assumptions as a society have shifted. Our age is one in which the Christian faith is one option amongst others, and in many circles, perhaps most, it has to be argued for against the prevailing intellectual assumptions.

The term secular society is no less contentious. It refers to a set of institutional arrangements for a shared public and social life. From this point of view therefore a secular society is not so much a description of what prevails in some countries, but a project which people support or oppose. It is not about belief for it is totally compatible to be a Christian believer and support a secular society. However, we can note a link here between the description of a secular age and the project for a secular society, in the sense that support for a secular society first emerged when people began to see themselves as living in a secular age. First, however, we have to tease out what might actually be meant by a secular society, for this too is contentious. France claims to be a secular society, but the state pays for the upkeep of Church buildings. England is not a secular society, for we have an established church, but the church itself has to pay for the upkeep of its buildings. So, it is not obvious what the term secular society might involve.

My starting point is the position of the distinguished scholar Amartya Sen, and his discussion of India.[4] Amartya Sen argues that a secular society is one in which the state treats all religions equally. The relationship between the state and its religions may be close or distant, that does not matter. The point is that in a secular state, which he regards as desirable, they are all treated equally. He believes that India is in principle such a state. In India, as we know, religion is a fundamental feature of human existence. He argues that the Indian constitution allows them all to participate in public life on an equal basis, though of course as we know, that position is highly contested by some Hindu nationalists, notably the BJP, who argue that India is a Hindu country, and this should be reflected in its political life structures. A good example of a policy which follows Amartya Sen's principle in our own country is that of state funding of state schools. All the major faiths can qualify for state funding of their faith-based school on an equal basis. So this is an example of a close relationship between the state and religion but on Sen's definition it still fits the idea of a secular society in that it is based on the principle that all religions are treated equally.

A rather different point of view is argued by Ronald Dworkin in relation to the United States of America.[5] The First Amendment of the American constitution makes a clear separation between the state and religion. However in recent years there have been vigorous advocates of the position which says that because America is predominantly a Christian believing country this should for example be reflected by prayers in state schools, which are forbidden at the moment. All agree that religious tolerance is fundamental. The issue is between a minimal religious state in which religion is in certain respects privileged, and a minimal secular state where it is kept out of public institutional arrangements altogether. Dworkin argues strongly for the latter. In short, he does not just say, as does Sen, that all religions should be treated on an equal basis. He maintains that they should be equally excluded from all public structures and institutions.

Here I must raise, however briefly, the question of establishment. Leaving aside Dworkin's view for the moment, and supposing you are sympathetic to that of Amartya Sen, of treating all religions equally, on what possible basis can you justify privileging one religion over another? Particularly if we live in a secular age, in which Christianity has to argue its case, often against the prevailing opinion that it is not true and might even be harmful?

Here I would want to suggest that we cannot ignore the history and culture of a society, which will inevitably be reflected in its political arrangements, and the religion of a society is an integral part of that history and culture, part of its identity. We are not just isolated individuals. Our membership of families, communities and society is a fundamental feature of our identity. It is therefore legitimate to take the history, culture and religion of our society into account when we are thinking of our political arrangements. However, we need to make a distinction between what is a purely symbolic privilege, and one in which other religions feel that their rights are being denied. There can be no question of privileging one religion in a way that denies fundamental human rights to others. However, when it comes to symbolic privilege, then it seems to me a matter of courtesy and negotiation as to whether these should remain. This is a big subject which it is not possible to pursue now, except to say that it is paradoxical that the strongest defenders of the establishment of the Church of England at the moment tend to be Jews and Muslim and leaders of other faiths. They argue that it helps them to make their contribution to public life to have an established church. In short, using my distinction, they clearly do not feel that their rights are in any way compromised, and

they accept a degree of symbolic privilege for a religion other than their own. Clearly that latter position must always be open to change and negotiation. For it is easy for the dominant religion to think that it is tolerant when others in fact experience it as oppressive.[6]

Putting the question of establishment aside, I now return to Dworkin's view about keeping religion completely out of all politically structured public space. But this can mean two things. It can mean not only not having prayer in state schools but saying that religious bodies should not be trying to influence public policy at all on the basis of their religion. Here Rowan Williams has made a useful distinction, now widely shared by others, between a marketplace from which religion has been excluded, and one in which there is a multiplicity of voices, including those of religious bodies. Behind these two attitudes we can discern two rather different approaches by thinkers of the Enlightenment, that of Locke on the one hand and Voltaire on the other. Locke wanted a society which was free for religion, all religions. This is what we have in America. Voltaire wanted a society which was free from religion. This is what we have, at least in part, in France. In fact, whether we like it or not in a democratic society we are bound to have a crowded marketplace in which religions, amongst others will be seeking to be heard, and trying to persuade others that certain political policies are better than others. That is very obviously the case in the United States, where advocates of religiously based policies have been militant on such issues as abortion. Not all of these have been from a right-wing standpoint, though these gained most attention during the Bush administration. One of the interesting features of the Obama campaign for President was his attempt to win back the association of religion and politics from the right to more progressive policies.

If we accept that religions have as much right as any other body to speak in the public sphere and advocate public policies, there still arises an interesting question that has been to the fore in recent debate about the kind of language that they should use. The position associated with the American philosopher John Rawls is that of course religions should contribute to the formation of public policy but that they should do so in terms that can be recognized and affirmed by everyone, whatever their religious views. He thinks we should try to achieve an overlapping consensus in public policy, and towards this end religions must, as it was, translate their specifically religious language and arguments into the language of ordinary human argument. This is what he calls public reasoning. Some religious thinkers strongly disagree and say that it is important both for Christian witness and for an authentic Christian contribution in the public sphere that we are unapologetic about both the religious basis of our views and the religious content.

I do not myself think we need see these two positions as mutually exclusive, nor do I think we should regard only the second position, when we are overt about the religious dimension, as the only truly Christian one. For historically Christianity has believed in natural law, the assumption behind which is that as human beings we share certain values and capacities by virtue of our humanity, whatever our religion or lack of it, and much of the debate about what makes for the common good rightly draws on what is common to us all. So, there is no need to be apologetic about making a contribution to public policy in which the Christian basis is implicit rather than overt.

The other aspect we need to bear in mind is that there are cultural differences between different societies, and an appeal to religion may be natural in one society but not another. The obvious example of this of course is the contrast between the United States and Britain. Because of its history America has the paradox of a constitution which is religiously neutral, but a public sphere in which the religious dimension is a major feature. In Britain just the opposite is true, for we have an established church but people feel very uncomfortable about people claiming high moral ground through an appeal to religion. So, on the one hand almost every American politician will make some reference to God in their public utterances, but Tony Blair kept religious references out of his speeches on the grounds, as he said afterwards, that he did not want to be dismissed as 'a nutter'.

That said, whilst for many normal purposes it might be natural to use public reasoning, the language of common discourse without appeal to religious foundations or motivations, there may very well be occasions when a more prophetic voice is needed, and one in which the Christian dimension is made clear.

I do not think this is an issue on which Christian should divide. It is partly a matter of temperament. More importantly it is a matter of judgment, bearing in mind the culture, the issue and the audience.

It is also important to note that the concept of public reasoning is not neutral as it might at first sight seem. In recent debates in the House of Lords on assisted dying, there was, in contrast to hostile critics of churches like Polly Toynbee, almost no appeal to a specifically religious argument. On the other hand, it was clear that the weight given to certain arguments did often depend on a person's underlying philosophical and religious perspective on life. This point is also made by Jonathan Chaplin in a recent Theos booklet.[7]

Now we need to look more closely at the reasons why Christianity should have a concern to influence public policy. I have indeed already suggested one reason. It is not possible to love our neighbour without considering the effect of political policies on her or him, for the state dominates so much of our lives. But there is another no less fundamental one.

At the heart of the teaching of Jesus was his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Mark's Gospel begins with his call that people should metanoia, that is re-think their lives, and put themselves under the kingship of God, whose kingdom Jesus was ushering in.

Behind this lies the age-old hope of the Jewish people that God would decisively act to put right everything that has gone wrong in this world and establish his just and gentle rule. This is a hope for the whole of human life. In the Hebrew scriptures religion concerns every aspect of the community, economic, legal, political. With the coming of the Kingdom life in its every aspect, personal and political, inward and outward, was to be transformed. So, although Enoch Powell, to take him as representing a point of view, is right to suggest that Jesus addressed people as individuals, and he first of all appealed to their inward dimension, their heart and mind, the Kingdom into which he invited them concerns the totality of life.

Powell, however, pointed to three aspects of the teaching of Jesus which he thought made it impossible to get a political programme from it. It is eschatological. And here is a real difficulty, one with which the church has struggled in every age. To put it briefly, those he called put themselves under God's rule, and by doing so in some sense entered his Kingdom, but he seemed to suggest that this kingdom was to come in its fullness very soon. But did it? Jews say 'No. Life goes on much as it did before. There has been no Messianic age.' 'Yes', said the Christians, for in some decisive sense it has come in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the beginning of the end. In him evil and death are overthrown, as they are overthrown for all who put their trust in him. But, say the Christians, the end is yet to come. We live between the times, between Christ's rising and his coming again in glory, when the Kingdom comes in its full consummation. The importance of this for Christian theology and ethics cannot be exaggerated, nor the challenge it has offered the church in every age. We see Christians in the New Testament having to adjust to the fact that the coming again of Christ in glory was not as soon as they first thought. By the end of the New Testament period, they are having to adjust to the fact that the church may be a continuing institution in a world that might go on for quite some time yet.

This delay in the parousia posed and continues to pose a number of questions which concern the whole area of Christian ethics and Christian lifestyles.[8] However, from the point of view of my theme here, there is one major one. Does the teaching of Jesus apply just to our personal relationships, or is it meant to apply as well to our public role. For example, Jesus said:

'Do not resist those who wrong you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other also. If anyone wants to sue you and takes your shirt, let him have your cloak as well. If someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with him two. Give to anyone who asks; and do not turn your back on anyone who wants to borrow.' (Matthew 5, 39-42)

Yet towards the end of the Second Century, we find Christians beginning to join the army. Were they right to do so? In the 4th century St Augustine acted as a magistrate, meeting out the tough punishments that were usual in the Roman Empire. Was he right to do so. A number of Chancellors of the Chequer have been believing Christians, as have bankers. Should they have given it to anyone who asked them for money?

It is important to note that this tension is not just between our private life and our public role. It is also present in our private life, and in the life of the church itself, for the fact of the matter is that for most of our decisions we act on the assumption that we need to plan responsibly for the future. We take out insurance for example, and religious communities build up endowments, whereas Jesus is recording as saying that we are not to be anxious about the future. We are to set our mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, trusting that our needs will be looked after. (Matthew 6, 33) However, the sharpest tension, the one with which I am concerned, is that between what we might do in a personal relationship and what we usually regard as responsible in a public role.

A familiar position is that of St Augustine, who took the view that whilst Christians belong to the City of God, which is being built up in human history, so long as that history lasts, we have to co-operate with others to help ensure the basic goods of life such as order and a minimal justice, without which no human society can exist. We have to work with others for the commonalities of life, those essentials that we share with everyone. This meant for someone like Luther, that whilst God rules the world through love expressed in our personal relationships, he also rules the world through the coercion exercised by the state. So, whilst he thought that if he was attacked when preaching the Gospel, he should not resist, if he was attacked as a citizen, he had a duty as a citizen to resist. In fact, for most of Christian history this kind of dualism, in one form or another, has been the norm.

Some Christians have taken a totally contrary position and argued that the clear implications of the teaching of Jesus cannot be evaded, and Christians should not take part in public life. They refuse to join the army. Sometimes they disassociate themselves as far as they can with all involvement with wider society, the best know example at the moment being the Mennonite communities in the United States. There are at the moment some influential and well respected theologians who similarly suggest that the job of the church is to be the church, enacting the full range of the demands of Jesus without qualification or evasion, but that in no way should we get involved with the political structures and policies of the world on their terms for this involves illegitimate compromises.[9] We can and must witness to the world, but only on our terms, with our radical message.

Here is a very clear example of that position by two American authors:

'We do not believe God has a double ethic. We do not believe God ordains a higher ethic for especially devout folk and a lower ethic for the masses. We do not believe that God intends Christians to wait until the millennium to obey the Sermon on the Mount. We do not believe God commands one thing for the individual and another for that same person as a public official.'^[10]

I believe that both the positions that I have mentioned are unsatisfactory. The first one, represented by Augustine and Luther, is indeed too dualistic. The second one, in rejecting all dualism, fails to grasp the implications of living between the times. For as long as God wills human life to continue to exist, he wills human communities and societies to exist, for as Austin Farrer put it, 'mind is a social reality'. We are essentially, not just contingently, inter-personal. We would not exist as people without other persons who have talked us into talking and then into that interior talking that we call thinking. But human societies, certainly above a certain size, cannot exist without a degree of coercion, even if it is only the bobby on the beat with the law behind him. It may not have been so in Eden, but it is now, and therefore so long as God wills human life to continue, he wills human communities to continue and an element of coercion without

which they cannot hold together. We could also make a rather different kind of argument for saying that so long as we live on this earth responsible planning for the future is a moral imperative. We rightly think about things like pensions so that we might not be a burden on others. We should take thought for the morrow, even if as Jesus said, we should not be obsessively anxious about it.

But this should not lead to total dualism. For the radical imperative of Jesus does bear upon public policy because the Kingdom he came to proclaim and inaugurate concerns the whole of human life, all that makes for human wellbeing and flourishing. The Divine Rule bears upon outward life as well as inward, material and well as spiritual, economic, political and social as well as interpersonal. However, so long as we continue on this earth that imperative cannot be responded to as though it was the only consideration. It lives in tension with the practical, prudential considerations that we have to take into account if we are going to have any kind of responsible, ordered existence. It lives in tension in two ways. In living before the absolute ideal of the Kingdom, we are aware always of a falling short. It may be the best we can do in the circumstances, but it is not what will finally prevail in the milieu of divine glory. Secondly, and this is the key point, that the absolute ideal beckons us to approximate to it, so far as we can in the circumstances of a finite, fallen world. We are not simply to resign ourselves to brutal realism. We are not simply to shrug our shoulders and say that nothing can be changed.

Let me take the example of the criminal justice system. Jesus said we are to forgive to seventy times seven, that is, without limit. Tolstoy believed that society, not just individuals, should live by this principle. The police, the courts, prisons: all should be abolished. Most people take a more realistic view. They believe that if that happened anarchy would ensue and human life as we know it would become impossible. The position for which I am arguing agrees that we need the criminal justice system. But it does not rest content with that. It says that the imperative of Jesus still bears upon it and we need to explore ways in which it can make a difference. One obvious one of course, is that we are never to lose sight of the fact that people in prison are human beings like ourselves, created by God and redeemed by Christ, and we must work for their rehabilitation into society and growth into the people whom God has in mind to be. So, prisons must never be simply places where people are locked up to punish them and keep them out of the way. They should be places which have their restoration to the community as good citizens are never lost sight of. Another potentially very creative development is restorative justice, originally pioneered by the Thames Valley Police and now taken up in a limited way elsewhere. This brings together the victim and perpetrator of the crime. In short, the ethic of Jesus should act as a catalyst on public policy, motivating us to look for new possibilities of making it a reality, so far as we can in the world as we know it.

Earlier I quoted a sentence by A.J.P. Taylor about the role of the state in our lives. 'All this was changed by the impact of the Great War.' The state now dominates our lives in a way it did not do before. But there is another aspect of that change, which has to do with the changing conditions of our lives and our expectations about them. In the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge there is a gloomy painting by Salvator Rosa (1615-73). Underneath is written the words 'Conception is sinful, birth a punishment, life hard labour, death inevitable.' Samuel Beckett could not have done better. For most of human history life was very hard, and for the majority of people, very hard indeed. Nasty, brutish and short, as Thomas Hobbes put it. People had little expectation that it could be changed for the better, and they viewed life as a moral obstacle course which if successfully surmounted led to a better one afterwards. Take just one aspect, infant mortality, which was incredibly high even in the 19th century, and which grieving parents could only just about cope with on the basis of a strong faith that their infants would go to heaven.

Salvator Rosa painted his picture in the 17th century, but by the 18th century things were already beginning to change. People began to think that the conditions of human life ought to be improved, and with the industrial revolution, the development of scientific medicine, public health policies, and the ever more rapid advances in science and technology in the 20th century, not least in the life sciences in recent decades, they could be improved. And that has proved to be the case in the West. So instead of looking to the state simply to maintain the status quo, to provide order and a minimum of justice, we now expect it to play its part in changing the conditions in which human beings live their lives.

St Paul saw the role of the state in terms of punishing wrongdoing (Romans 13, 1-6). We do not see the state only in these narrow terms. Governments, elected by the people, are there not only to judge but to order our common life for the common good. We have a conviction that, within limits, this can be done and ought to be done.[11]

In the 19th century, partly no doubt as a result of Darwin's theory of evolution, people began to think in terms of the inevitable advance of society and civilization. Christians began to think of the gradual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. This easy optimism was shattered by the impact of World War I. But in any case, the idea of the gradual advance of the Kingdom of God on earth as reflected in improving social conditions is not a New Testament idea. However, the danger of reacting against ideas of automatic progress is that Christians could be lulled into thinking that the time between Christ's rising and his coming in glory is simply a time of waiting. But that again is untrue to the New Testament. What the early church records in these in-between times are signs of the Kingdom. The church itself is one such sign, a pledge of the new society which has been recreated round Jesus. The early church also recorded miracles, which it regarded as signs of the breaking in of the Kingdom of God.

I do not think we should necessarily look for miracles in terms of the old definition of events that are contrary to nature. But we should expect signs; signs that that the reign of God has broken into this world in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a reign which will come into its consummation in God's good time. For meanwhile we have the Holy Spirit working with and in and through us, bringing signs of that time when all things will be transformed. It is a mistake for Christians simply to wait for that end time. It is equally a mistake to talk about building up God's kingdom on earth. It is not a mistake to try to let God work in and through us to bring some change that is at the same time an inkling of a better, utterly changed world. As a prayer by Percy Dearmer puts it:

O God,
 who set before us the great hope
 that your kingdom shall come on earth
 and taught us to pray for its coming:
 give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning
 and to work for the perfect day
 when the whole world shall reflect your glory;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Acting in the everyday world, including the political and economic spheres, to make a difference, with those differences perhaps indicating some way the total difference of God's future, is how we bring the imperative of Jesus to bear upon the hard realities of the world as we know it. So long as we are in this world there will be an ineradicable tension between those hard realities and that imperative which impels us to something different. But that imperative stirs us to look for possibilities that may not be obvious to the hardheaded realist. For the possibilities are the possibilities of the God who has disclosed himself in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Those possibilities do not do away with the realities of the world, even whilst they may challenge our too narrow understanding of what is possible. Reinhold Niebuhr used to describe the ethic of Jesus as 'An impossible possibility'. A critic of Niebuhr wrote a book entitled "The relevance of the impossible," which is an equally useful phrase to indicate how the ethic of Jesus bears upon the world. It is relevant. It makes a difference even in the toughest world of politics. But it does not abolish that world, and it can be realized only in a proximate form.

A very dramatic example of the tension I am talking about occurred at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956. Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher was deeply suspicious about what was happening even at a time when he did not know about the collusion between Britain and Israel. In one dramatic debate in the House of Lords he

intervened eight times with the same simple question 'Who then was the attacker?' Lord Hailsham who was defending the Government's position in the Lords was furious and he and Fisher had a long and politely ferocious exchange of letters.

What is most interesting is Fisher's serious intellectual grappling with the general question of what was appropriate for a church leader to say in such circumstances. In one letter of 11 closely typed pages of A5 paper [12] he said that he and Hailsham had 'Quite different conceptions as to the principles which ought to guide an Archbishop in discharging his duties'. [13] His starting point is the duty of obedience to God. 'It is the ceaseless task of the Christian and the Christian minded state to strive after that one obedience.' There are two interesting points about that sentence. First, the reference simply to 'the Christian', a reference that would include both Archbishop and lay person, and that lay person in both their private and their public role. Secondly, the phrase 'Christian minded state'. It implies, in a rather careful way, that the state, as a state, is to strive after that one obedience. It is doubtful if now, what is so often referred to as our multi faith society, would be receptive to this kind of language, but the archbishop felt it was still appropriate in 1956.

So, there is 'one obedience', but the archbishop then goes on to say that the government, which of course Hailsham was representing, and he as Archbishop, approaches this from opposite ends. The Government is concerned with the temporal ends of the society it governs, but he as Archbishop is concerned, referring to God, 'To relate what I can perceive of his perfect will to our temporal affairs... that is my special contribution.' He said that, starting from different ends it is not surprising that they do not come to an exact meeting point. When that is the case 'It is our duty to call to each other so that we may help and warn each other.'

Fisher then quotes Temple to the effect that we can only look at issues properly if we can exorcise self-centeredness, but interestingly applies this not to the individual case, but to public policy. A government will inevitably look at issues from a national perspective. He, as Archbishop, will look at them from a much wider view, and he reminds Hailsham, rather sharply, that he has duties not only to the nation, but to the wider world, and in particular to the wider church at home and abroad. Which leads again to his emphasis on referring the matter to the UN as a way of approaching that wider perspective.

This letter is very revealing, and although Fisher is not usually rated as a theologian, it seems to me that his understanding of the respective roles of politician and church leader, and how they might approach the issue, could hardly be bettered. What we note above all is that whilst there is a tension there is no absolute dualism. There is a proper difference of roles, a genuine tension, but no abyss between the two.

I now come to the final aspect of this subject that I wish to consider. How specific should church leaders be in trying to speak for God? It is possible to speak in very general terms. 'Both sides should strive for peace.' But this can be platitudinous and in fact amount to saying nothing. As David Jenkins used to say, 'Generally speaking bishops are generally speaking.' On the opposite extreme a statement can, be quite specific in advocating a particular policy. The disadvantage of this of course is that it will almost certainly be controversial and raise questions as to how far the church leader is speaking for the church and not just him or herself. Could Christians recognise it as a Christian statement, one which has an integral connection to the faith - to return to a difficulty I raised right at the beginning.

There is much to be said for a position between these two extremes. This involves setting out Christian principles which should be taken into account whilst recognizing that it is the statesman, not the churchman who has to make the decision and bear responsibility for it. A good example of this is the set of criteria known as the Just War principles, which have been much to the fore in debates over the last fifty years, first in relation to the nuclear issue and more recently in relation to wars of intervention. Of themselves they do not say whether a particular war is morally justified or not but they do set out a set of criteria which must be taken into account in making such a judgment. Nevertheless, this does not preclude, on certain

occasions, something more specific.

During the 1960's and 70's many Christians were critical of the positions being taken by the World Council of Churches in their programme to combat racism. The distinguished American ethicist Paul Ramsey voiced some of their views in his book *Who Speaks for the Church?*[14] In that book he held out as a model of the kind of statement the church should make what Archbishop Michael Ramsey said in relation to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Ian Smith the Prime Minister of what was then Southern Rhodesia. The Archbishop wrote to Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, to say

If notwithstanding all efforts, there shall come a breakdown and if you and your government should judge it necessary to use force to sustain our country's obligations, I am sure a great body of Christian opinion would support you.[15]

For avoidance of doubt Ramsey later clarified in correspondence exactly what he had said. It was:

If Rhodesia goes over the brink, I agree that it is not for us as Christian Churches to give the government military advice as to what is practicable or possible. That is not our function. But if the British Government thought it practicable to use force for the protection of the rights of the majority of the Rhodesian people, then I think that as Christians it will be right to use force to that end. [16]

The telegram to the Prime Minister and these words created a major row. There were a number of letters, such as the one from Joost de Blank, the former Archbishop of Capetown, which simply said, 'Of course what you said was absolutely right' and others which lauded his courage. But the majority were vitriolic in their rage. The right wing, and in particular the Christian right wing, unleashed its sanctimonious, abusive hostility.

Ramsey was interviewed on the Ten O'clock programme of the Home Service on October 27th, and again he tried to make his point clear.

I've emphasized the fact-and so did the British Council of Churches emphasise the fact that it is for the Prime Minister and the government to make judgements as to what is really going to be practicable. And what we said was that if in the judgement of the statesmen, its really practicable to use force in this context, then we believe the Christian conscience should allow the use of force, if its of the nature of police force in order to forestall and prevent more indiscriminate kinds of force and violence. [17]

What Ramsey said was not platitudinous. Nor on the other hand was he advocating a particular policy. He made it quite clear that the decisions were the responsibility of the Government. Nevertheless, he offered clear guidance about the moral dimension of this course of action, if the Government decided on it.

That is not the only model of how to speak for God in a secular society, but it is one which does try to recognize the respective responsibilities of government and church.

This lecture has sought to establish the locus on the basis of which the Christian church approaches the whole political order. The next will look at the specific issue of law and morality.

[1] A.J.P.Taylor, English History 1914-1945, OUP, 1965.p.1

[2] A point made by Edward Norman, a scholar very critical of church pronouncements on public affairs. Though highly critical, for the reason given above, he argued 'In the world the Christian seeks to apply the great love of God as well as he can in contemporary terms. And that will actually involve corporate social and political action.'. Edward Norman, Christianity and World Order, OUP, 1965, p.79

[3] Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, Harvard University Press, 2007

[4] Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian, Allen Lane 2005

[5] Ronald Dworkin,

[6] I became aware of this when, as a member of the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords (The Wakeham Commission), we received a delegation from the churches of Britain and Northern Ireland. I was conscious of 'ancestral voices', the historic, and as it turned out, continuing, resentment of the non-Anglican churches about the privileged position of the Church of England.

[7] Talking God: The legitimacy of religious public reasoning, Jonathan Chaplin, Theos 2008

Working with the distinction between programmatic and procedural secularism, he makes the important point that the latter is not always as neutral as its advocates suggest. Assumptions can be smuggled into even procedural issues, as on the issue of the funding of political parties, for here it is a question of whether economic or political freedom is given the greater weight. One of the ways in which an illegitimate assumption has got into the debate on procedural secularism is the view that the only kind of public reasoning that is acceptable is one that does not overtly refer to a religious basis for it. If a religiously based reason is put forward, it is apparently felt by some people that this is a failure of respect, for equality of respect demands that all reasons be equally accessible. Chaplin rightly says that what matters is equality of persons, and in fact this does not just allow but demands confessional candour on behalf of the religious and non-religious alike. Whether religiously based reasons are put forward will depend very much on the context, and it may be right to be very sparing, but they cannot be ruled out in principle-furthermore religiously based reasons will overtake go alongside reasons that do not have that basis.

[8] See Richard Harries, The Re-enchantment of Christian Morality, SPCK, 2008

[9] Two of the best known are Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. Their influence has been shown in for example Stanley Wells and Ben Quash. See Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, OUP 2010 where this approach is contrasted with the very different one of Reinhold Niebuhr.

[10] Ronald J. Sider and Richard K.Taylor, Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope, Hodder and Stoughton, 1983, p.132

[11] Oliver O'Donovan has organised his political theology around the theme of judgment. But our expectations of government cannot be kept within that category today, however widely O'Donovan interprets the nature of judgment. See his The Ways of Judgment, Eerdmans, 2005

[12] On a rough calculation it is well over 5000 words. 'Theology' asks that essays submitted be not longer

than 3,500 words.

[13] Fisher Papers, Vol. 171. p.309ff

[14] Paul Ramsey, *Who speaks for the church?*, St Andrews Press, 1969

[15] *ibid* p.247

[16] Ramsey Papers, Vol 105, p.271. Lord Saltoun was going to make a speech in the House of Lords critical of Ramsey, and wrote to him to make sure he quoted him accurately.

[17] Ramsey Papers, Vol. 85, p.311