

**“IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT”:  
CATHOLIC REALISM IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN**

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The central question in what I offer here is an ancient and tantalising one: What does it mean to be “in the world but not of it”? It is a question which the Bible asks in the first place about God. The gods of the pagan world are in the world and of it: they are imprisoned in the very world which they are supposed to have created or the fate of which they are supposed to control. The God of the Bible, however, is different. He is certainly in the world, as the biblical narrative testifies quite spectacularly. This is never more so than when the Word takes flesh. And yet the Bible also insists with a passion that God is utterly beyond this world, absolutely other, wholly transcendent. Here we have the paradox: a God who is intimately involved in the world, yet in no way its prisoner. Indeed, a God whose transcendence is a condition of his intimacy, understood as a free and constant bridging by God of the infinite distance between him and us.

This same paradox emerged as the early Church explored more deeply the unfathomable mystery of Jesus Christ. Even in the New Testament, it is possible to trace a trajectory of insight which leads the Church to see more and more of Jesus. In no very neat fashion, low Christology gives way to high Christology as the early Church comes to see more of the truth that the One who was unquestionably human was also divine. This trajectory of insight will reach

a point of maturity at the Council of Nicaea in 325 when the Church proclaims the truth that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. But this was a hard-won insight, which was arrived at only after bitter dispute and even bloodshed; and it is an insight which can never be taken for granted. It is always under threat.

What is true of God and of Jesus Christ is also true of God's people. The divine call which echoes through the Book of Leviticus is: "Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy". The Chosen People of the Old Testament and the Church of the New Testament are to be "in the world but not of it", since this is what it means to be holy as God is holy. But the precise implications of this have not always been clear.

Answers to the question, What does it mean for the Church to be in the world but not of it?, have varied from time to time and from place to place. At one end of the spectrum there are Christian communities like the Amish people who are decidedly "not of the world", and at the other end there are Christian communities – one thinks especially of some ultra-liberal groups within Western Christianity – who are very much "in the world", to the point where there seems to be no difference at all. Unworldliness and worldliness always beckon; they are the Scylla and Charybdis between which Christians must move.

For many of you it is more specifically a matter of finding a way between economic imperatives on the one hand and Gospel imperatives on the other. Economic imperatives cannot simply be dismissed unless we ourselves are to be dismissed as hopelessly unworldly. But neither can they so dominate our institutions and agencies that we end up simply running a business and paying lip-service to the Gospel. Money and mission both matter; they always did. Someone bank-rolled Jesus and his mission; and, however many tents the Apostle may have made, someone other than Saint Paul himself bank-rolled his large, complex and very expensive apostolic mission. We need money – usually public money and lots of it; but we need it not as an end in itself. We need

money to preach the Gospel. That is the tension we seek to hold, the fine line we seek to tread.

The institutions and agencies represented here have no choice but to depend upon public funding: it's a matter of survival. But the question is whether being "in the world" in this way allows Catholic institutions and agencies to be different, to be "not of the world". This was a question asked when public funding first came to Catholic schools: Will government funding compromise our distinctively Catholic identity? It is always a challenge to maintain the Catholic identity of our institutions and agencies, but it is hard to argue that this is because we are receiving large amounts of government funding. The challenge seems to arise for other reasons.

To the question, What might it mean for the institutions and agencies represented here to be "in the world but not of it" at this time, I would answer: To give institutional shape to a new Christian humanism, a vision of what it means to be human, and to do this as a service to society as a whole. But this prompts further questions, What do I mean by a new Christian humanism? What is our vision of what it means to be human? And it is to those questions that I now turn.

Any Christian humanism worthy of the name will have deeply biblical roots, which is why the Bible must be central to the life and work of Catholic institutions and agencies; but that is a large theme for another time and another address. Beyond the Bible, the Christian humanism of the West has roots which reach in other directions as well. It was the Greek philosopher Protagoras, it seems, who in the fifth century BC first spoke of "man as the measure of all things", and thus articulated something at the heart of the culture of which he was both product and spokesman. Ancient Greece shaped a humanism which was not yet Christian but which would leave a mighty imprint upon Christian humanism at a later time, as we see in different ways in the works of seminal thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas.

Centuries later, Shakespeare put these words on the lips of his Hamlet: “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!” (*Hamlet*, II, 2). Here again the biblical and classical worlds come to a point of grand convergence. In the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope declared that “the proper study of mankind is man” (*Essay on Man*, Epistle II), which in his own view was a reaction against a false theology which ignored the human being and preferred to concentrate on God, as if one had to choose between the divine and the human.

Yet for all the sense of the human being as the epicentre of things in both the Bible and Western civilisation, things have changed and are still changing dramatically. It is hard to say exactly when the process began, but in more recent times we have witnessed an unsettling of the centre. Two devout Catholics, the Pole Nicholas Copernicus in the sixteenth century and the Italian Galileo Galilei in seventeenth, were great catalysts in the process, with their demonstration that the earth revolved around the sun rather than *vice versa*.

Beyond them came the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century with its radical questioning of authority and mediation of any kind and its institutional ramifications such as the beheading of Louis XVI in France, which was preceded by the execution of Charles I in England. The kings may have paid the ultimate price, but the real question concerned mediation and authority.

The nineteenth century brought further assaults on traditional Christian humanism, with the work of Darwin seeming to shake still more the biblical account of creation and hence the foundations of culture still more, the work of Freud unsettling conventional notions of human motivation and freedom, and the work of Marx seeming to challenge biblical understandings of history.

The process continued apace into the twentieth century, resulting in the kind of deep relativisation we find in the writings of someone like Peter Singer, who has claimed that we will eventually feel greater guilt for eating a fish than

destroying a human fetus. Claims like this seem to represent the final triumph of secularism, and the death of Christian humanism.

It is this death which seems to haunt the plays of Samuel Beckett, the best known of which is *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett may have been ruminating upon the absence of God: who knows? But in this postmodern moment which can make even Beckett appear strangely out-moded, it seems less a matter of *Waiting for Godot* than of *Waiting for Manot*, with the human being rather than God the one who is now strangely absent.

Beckett would probably agree with what that other Irishman W. B. Yeats writes in his poem, *The Second Coming*: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. In one view, the centre here is the human being, understood as the apogee and focus of a divine plan which embraces a cosmos, itself now emerging as unimaginably old, vast and unstable. Later in the twentieth century, the literary critic Frank Kermode was in some sense right when he wrote that now “the centre is everywhere” (*The Sense of an Ending*); and the question for us is this: In a world where the centre is everywhere, does it make sense any more to talk of Christian humanism?

The question is pointed at a time when, for many, to speak of Christian humanism is a kind of oxymoron, since Christianity is for them is a prime historical force which has denied the full potential of the human being, which can be realised only in so far as the shackles of the Judeo-Christian tradition are thrown off. I would claim, however, that it makes excellent sense to speak of Christian humanism at the present time. It must, however, be reconfigured if it is not to sound like the idiom of a bygone age.

Some see the Catholic Church as the great enemy of modernity, and therefore as quite unable to deal with postmodernity, obsessed as the Church is perceived to be with changelessness. Yet for all the apparent changelessness of the Catholic Church, a great deal has in fact changed in recent times. The great catalyst of change in the last century was of course the Second Vatican Council.

The Council was an intensely complex phenomenon, and its interpretation remains a matter of dispute. In my own view, the Council was the Church's prime response to the breakdown of Western Christian civilisation signaled by the two great conflicts which we normally refer to as World War I and World War II, but which were in fact two parts of a single ongoing conflict, in which the aggressor in both parts was one of the indisputably great Christian nations, Germany.

This conflict led eventually to the apocalyptic emblems of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, after which nothing could be quite the same. Indeed there were those who claimed that after Auschwitz it was not possible to speak either of God or to God. The very ground of Christian humanism, it would seem, had been shattered. In its effort to address this appalling past and build for the future, for the Third Millennium, the Council returned to the sources. Normally this is taken to mean a return to the reading of Scripture and the Church Fathers; and in a sense this was what provided the energy that produced the Council. But at a deeper level the return to the sources was a new vision of Christ, the one source of revelation, the source of all sources. In the terms of the Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Council was seeking "to start afresh from Christ", since there was nowhere else to start after the ash-heaps of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Certainly there was nowhere else to start in the attempt to reconfigure Christian humanism in a brutally reconfigured world.

The key to understanding the Council's vision of Christ is found in Paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et Spes*, which speaks of Christ not only as revealer of God to humanity but also the revealer of humanity to itself. In other words, it is only in Christ risen from the dead that we see the fullness of truth about who God is and who the human being is. The Council therefore makes a fresh link between Christology and anthropology, and sees this as the way into the future. "The way of the Church is man", in the words of John Paul II (*Redemptor Hominis*, 14), but only because the way of the Church, indeed the way of all

humanity, is Christ. To take any other path into the future, the Council claims, will lead only and inevitably to an endless repetition of the catastrophes which so disfigured the twentieth century.

What emerges in Christ is a magnificent vision of human possibility, which dwindles to the extent that the vision of Christ fades. To see Christ is to understand what Richard Kearney, yet another Irishman who, like Beckett, writes at times in French, means when he claims that God is not only *Être* but also and more exactly *Peut-être (Poétique du possible)*. God is not only being, but possibility; and the infinite possibility which God is for the human being emerges only in the Risen Christ, in whom we see that sin and death, which seem so endemic to the human condition, are in fact alien to the human being. We were created neither to sin nor to die.

This vision of human possibility the Council opened up in response to the depressing reduction of human possibility in the World Wars, where sin and death had seemed wholly regnant. The only way out of such a claustrophobic and death-dealing world is Christ. That is why the Council issued the call for a new evangelisation, which became the dominant theme of John Paul II's pontificate. In his first Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, the Pope spoke of this evangelisation. The heart of it, he claimed, is man's deep wonder at himself once he sees Christ, "the new man". He went on: "The name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say, the Good News. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the Church's mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, in the modern world" (10).

From the vision of Christ there comes a vision of the human person created in the image of God and possessed therefore of certain universal and inviolable rights. In many ways, human rights discourse came to birth in the eighteenth century against the Church. Its roots are clearly biblical but the Church was seen as a key ally of the very forces which prompted human rights

discourse as a reaction to injustice. But a major achievement of John Paul II was a final reclaiming of human rights discourse for Christianity, so that by the end of his long pontificate the Catholic Church was generally seen as a prime defender of human dignity around the world and a prime guardian of human rights.

It is the sense of the dignity of the human person and the inviolable rights which flow from this that enables dialogue with those who do not share our assumptions. Therefore, the Catholic Church is duty-bound to take the biblically based understanding of the human person and the understanding of the ecology of human society which flows from this and communicate it to those who do not share our intellectual assumptions or our Christian faith. Many of the real disagreements within a culture like ours are disagreements about what it means to be human; and it is here that dialogue is needed. In other words, a true Christian humanism needs to be explained, and at times defended, in a culture where reductive, utilitarian and materialist notions of the human person often enough prevail.

Some time ago, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference published a very useful document called *Being Human*, which explains the Catholic understanding of the human person. Its opening line is this: "Behind so many of the disputed questions of our day lies a more basic question, What is it to be human? Competing answers to this question are implicit in contemporary debates about genetic engineering, care for the environment, sexuality and marriage, the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, mandatory sentencing and ways of funding our health care". The question, it would seem, is more than theoretical: in fact it has very practical consequences.

The document sets out five guiding affirmations:

1. Every human being is a unique person created in the image of God.

2. Human persons are at once both spiritual and material beings: we belong to the physical universe, and yet we are destined for relationship with God, now and for all eternity.
3. As social beings, our fulfilment lies in establishing and maintaining just and faithful relationships with all other members of the human family.
4. As moral beings our fulfilment lies in coming to know and pursue the truth about the good through love of God and neighbour.
5. Sexuality belongs to the goodness of God's creation, and genital sexuality finds its true fulfilment in the commitment of marriage and the procreation of new human beings.

These five affirmations lead to a view of the human being as both created and evolved, both bodily and spiritual, both individual and social, both free and responsible, both male and female. The vision of the human person which they imply is, I think, the ground upon which Christian humanism must stand, now no less than in the past. But it is not enough simply to repeat such statements as if they were self-evidently true or as if they were some kind of mantra which might work its magical effect just by dint of repetition. In a culture such as ours, these are claims which must be explored, argued and explained in the public domain.

In the first place, such claims require rigorous thinking which resists all attempts to see faith and reason as somehow enemies. John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* is precisely an insistence upon the mutuality of faith and reason. It begins: "Faith and reason are like two wings upon which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth"; and it goes on to claim that reason without faith falls short of exploring the transcendence of being, and that faith without reason withers into superstition. Many found it deeply ironic that at the end of the twentieth century, when so many had lost confidence in the power of reason to know the truth, if truth indeed existed, it was the Pope of Rome who emerged as the prime defender of reason, when so often in the past the papacy

has been decried as the great bastion of obscurantism and the archenemy of reason.

The Pope may have spoken of the human spirit rising to the contemplation of truth, but this did not imply some neo-platonic flight from the *chiaroscuro* of the world as we know it to some ideal world of pure light. The one thing we can't afford at this time is to leave the world behind, and the Church's institutions and agencies can never surrender the deeply Catholic sense that the Word took flesh once in time and that the Word is now found always and only in the flesh. I am speaking here of the Incarnation, not only as a past event but as the enduring mode of God's relating to the world. It has been said that if any biblical text goes to the heart of the Catholic experience of Christianity it is John 1:14: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory".

Early in the twentieth century, the French Catholic writer Charles Péguy spoke of the widespread, often implicit denial of the Incarnation which he saw as a mystical disaster, by which he meant a denial leading to a false mysticism of the kind we now see in New Age religiosity as we did in the past in other forms of Gnosticism. Such a false mysticism leads to the sense that we must escape the world to find God, thus wholly spiritualising our relationship with God. We end up thinking that we have to escape or deny our humanity to find the divinity. This cannot be the way of the Catholic Church, which must insist that the Word was and is always made flesh, and thus scrutinise the "flesh" of things in order to discover the God who is truth.

To speak of truth in a postmodern culture runs the risk of seeming to speak the language of another time, for there are many now who would question the existence or the knowability of truth. Yet Catholic thinking has always insisted that truth does exist, even absolute truth, and that this can be known by the human being, albeit with the indispensable aid of divine revelation in the far reaches of truth revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Catholic sense of universal truth puts paid to any notion of truth as attained by some kind of moral consensus or majority vote, both of which tend to lead to one form or other of the rule of the powerful, with the weakest inevitably suffering the most. Thinking which is tied to universal truth is the best guarantee of an incisive critique of ideology, which is again something which the Catholic Church can offer in a culture like this.

Such a critique will be based upon a sound understanding of human freedom as essentially tied to truth; and this question of freedom is as pressing now as it ever was. Salman Rushdie, for instance, has noted that Nazism and certain forms of militant Islamism, though essentially different phenomena, pose the same question: How should a free society address a minority which, if it came to power or were no longer a minority, would seek to abolish the freedom which hitherto made it possible for it to exist and flourish? This is a haunting question which involves the nature of pluralism in contemporary Western democracies and which asks whether these democracies can be turned against themselves in the way Western technology was to such devastating effect on September 11, 2001. Here again we see how Catholic thinking about freedom and the related critique of ideology are far from being merely theoretical. We also see how Catholic thought – and indeed Catholic institutions and agencies – must resist all attempts to consign religion to the strictly private realm and deny it the right to impinge in any way upon the public realm.

At this point, let me dwell more explicitly upon the theme of religion in the public domain, since it is central to a reflection upon what it means at this time to be “in the world but not of it”. For various reasons, we have come to a point where the question of the relationship between religious belief and public policy is more pointed than it has been for some time. On the one hand, we have a culture where there is powerful pressure to deny religion any right to intervene in the public domain. On the other hand, however, we have religion which refuses to retire to some purely private or sacral world. Therefore the question

is not *whether* but *how*, at this time and in this culture, religion should relate to the public domain.

In an address at the Library of Congress entitled “What Kind of Democracy Leads to Secularism?” (13 February 2007), Cardinal Francis George of Chicago pondered this theme, and in doing so he drew upon the Augustinian distinction between the sacred, the profane and the secular. The secular, or the *saeculum* as the Cardinal also calls it, is the space between the sacred and the profane which respects and safeguards the distinctiveness of each, the space where there can occur conversations between faith and culture on the one hand and faith and reason on the other.

“If everything is sacred”, says Cardinal George, “then the faith community swallows up the world and society becomes a convent”. But if on the other hand everything is profane – as secular ideology insists – then all religion is regarded as divisive; and, especially after a trauma like 9/11, it must be excluded from the public domain. At that point, the Cardinal claims, “agnosticism and moral relativism are [regarded as] necessary to preserve peace, truth becomes the enemy of freedom and freedom itself is reduced to individual autonomy”. In such a situation, what dresses itself up as state neutrality can in fact be state disdain for religion, which is tolerated only in so far as it provides private consolation and public charity.

With its vital role to play in mediating between the sacred and the profane so that each respects the other, the secular is very different from the secularism of which Cardinal George offers an incisive critique. Secularism claims that democracy depends upon the exclusion of religion from the public domain, religion of its nature is supposed to be divisive. Public life has to be constructed on the assumption that God does not exist or, if he does, that it makes no difference. As part of this process, the notion of religious freedom is re-defined: it becomes no more than freedom of private conscience and worship. Crucially,

it excludes the freedom of religious institutions to have a public voice or to be public actors.

Yet, as the Cardinal notes, “religious institutions are by their own communal nature public actors”, and “democracy depends on a vision of what it means to be human that it itself cannot provide”. “Secular societies need inspiration about the nature of the person and of freedom, ultimate perspectives and human virtues, which they cannot find within themselves, and they depend upon religious and moral traditions to provide it”.

This means that, in so far as they exclude religion from the public domain under the pressure of secularist ideology, liberal democracies such as ours are shooting themselves in the foot. Cardinal George points to the figure of Alexis de Tocqueville who wondered whether democracy’s protection of human rights might be lost through democracy’s gradual undermining of the sources that gave a secure basis to these rights in society – by which he meant the discipline of virtue and of religious convictions. In attempting to exclude religion from the public domain, this is precisely what secularist ideology is in danger of doing; and it is one major reason why Catholic institutions and agencies need now to understand and resist secularist ideology.

Some who are not necessarily committed to secularist ideology worry about what they judge to be Catholic absolutism – for which read dogmatism or even fundamentalism – and its intrusion into the public domain. The same people tend to see the Catholic sense of the absolute as an absolute No to anything that they consider to be liberating and life-affirming, or to anything that might look like progress.

Yet what lies at the heart of Catholic faith is something quite different. There we find not negativity, but a wonderfully affirmative sense of God as absolute, of Jesus as the absolute revelation of God, of the absolute claim of God upon us, and of absolute values rooted in the fact that the human being is created in the image of God. This Catholic sense of the absolute is tied to the Catholic

vision of wholeness, fullness, completion, such as we find in the Book of Revelation with its final vision of the glory of the new and eternal Jerusalem (21:9 – 22:5). That is where we are heading, and we cannot rest easy until we have made it. In that sense, nothing less than the absolute will satisfy Catholic faith.

But this sense of the absolute does not mean an absolutism which sees the world, and the public domain, in terms of “all or nothing”. The problem with such an apocalyptic view of the world is that it leads too easily to a kind of ideology and makes Catholic engagement in the public domain a kind of ideological warfare, which it can never be without compromising the Church’s specifically religious identity and implying perhaps the claims that error has no rights and that the Church should dominate the state. If the faith becomes ideology in that way, then there is a risk that the best will become the enemy of the good, that because we insist upon all or nothing, nothing is precisely what we shall achieve.

Instead, I would propose a Catholic realism, which in no way betrays the vision of the absolute, but which does not become an ideologically geared absolutism. It would also avoid the kind of unprincipled pragmatism which is the equal and opposite threat to an unrealistic absolutism and which leads inevitably to the relativism which Pope Benedict XVI has analysed so tellingly. Such a Catholic realism should, I think, rise naturally from the Christian humanism of which I have spoken.

To steer a path between an ideological absolutism and an unprincipled pragmatism is, in my view, to take the way of Catholic realism, which moves – sometimes step by step, sometimes one step forward, two steps backward – towards the absolute which never ceases to be the lodestar of the journey. In other words, we need to keep one eye firmly fixed on what is possible in the real world, and the other eye no less firmly fixed on what is possible within the plan of God, on the glory of the new Jerusalem, which means on the fulness of what

the Church teaches. We need vision, certainly; but we also need strategy. And we have to remember that, as we journey towards the absolute, we want to draw as many as possible with us on the way, for we are surely forbidden to listen and speak only to ourselves.

A Catholic realism such as this would involve a number of things:

a) An incisive and comprehensive analysis of a culture which is in a state of deep flux and which can therefore be harder than ever to read. Such an analysis is surely proper to the institutions and agencies represented here, especially perhaps Australian Catholic University.

b) A preparedness to argue not just assert, keeping in mind the importance which Catholic faith assigns to the work of reason and the traditional Catholic conviction that the intentions of God are uncovered not only in revelation but also in the structure of the world God made. Such argument is again especially appropriate for a University such as this.

c) A genuine dialogue with those who see things differently than we do, with an effort to find a shared language, in particular about the human person. I am reminded here of the point made by Professor John Finnis and others that Catholics could and should participate in public policy debates without appealing to their religion, relying instead upon those “public reasons” accessible to people of all faiths and none; and this without in any way compromising their principles or abandoning their faith. Such a dialogue and the search for a shared language is again proper to the institutions and agencies represented here.

d) A keen sense of political realities, of what is possible at this time and in this culture within the public domain, keeping in mind that almost always the question at issue in public debate is not so much whether particular practices are morally justifiable, but whether regulation of them is necessary in a humane society. This requires a moral sensitivity to assess to what extent we can tolerate evil in trying to achieve some good, by which I mean a limiting of the evil. The

combination of political awareness and moral sensitivity is also required of the institutions and agencies represented here.

e) A preparedness to witness to moral truth in a pluralist society, even while listening to the claims of other voices and recognising that there may be situations where a policy accepted is less than the full moral truth to which we witness. Such witness to moral truth is again proper to Catholic institutions and agencies.

An approach of this kind can open the way to the wisdom born of the marriage of faith and reason, vision and strategy. This wisdom will allow us to find the right balance between private and public worlds at this time. It will also show us the way to true Christian zeal beyond an ideologically geared zealotry; and at a time when such zealotry abounds, I can think of little that is more necessary than a truly Catholic wisdom which speaks the full truth of the human person and human society, revealed in Christ crucified and risen who, as Paul says, “became for us wisdom from God” (1 Cor 1:30). Jesus may not be “a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age”, as the Apostle puts it (1 Cor 2:6), but that is no cause for embarrassment or dismay, “for God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom”.

In the end, it is the wisdom of God which is the soul of any Catholic institution or agency, and it is the key to understanding their distinctive mission and identity. To be wise in the way of God is to be “in the world but not of it”. It is the way of the Church which will allow us to contribute to the public domain, the properly secular public domain, that vision of what it means to be human, that discourse on truth and freedom, those ultimate perspectives which, as the Archbishop of Chicago noted, the *saeculum* cannot provide for itself. As Abraham says to Isaac when the boy asks where is the victim for the sacrifice: “God will provide” (Gen 22:8). That is why – to put it briefly and a little bluntly – the *saeculum* needs us; and it is also why we need God.