THE INTERACTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Wednesday 16 March 2011

The River Room, House of Lords

At a seminar chaired by the Lord Speaker, Baroness Hayman, in the House of Lords, Members of the House and senior journalists discussed the impact of religion on contemporary global and domestic politics, the interaction of faith with political structures and institutions, and the place of religion in public life. Short introductory speeches were delivered by three Members before the debate was opened up to the floor.

In the first of the opening speeches, Lord Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, reflected on the separation between state and religion. It was initially believed that the growing secularism created by the enlightenment marked an end of the influence of religion. In fact, in the United States, which was identified by contemporary observers as a society where the state was non-religious, more people attended places of worship on a weekly basis than in countries which were theocracies such as Iran.

Lord Sacks argued that religion still has a role and influence in society. Robert Putnam argued in ‘American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites us’ that religion was a source for social capital. Whilst Niall Ferguson argued in ‘Civilization: The West and the Rest’ that religion had a key role in making Western civilization successful. Whoever does not understand religion will not understand the 21st century.

In the modern world, most functions which were previously carried out by religion now have an alternative provider and advances in science and technology appear to have made religion redundant. However, religion provides answers to three key questions: Who am I? Why am I here? How shall I live my life?

Lord Sacks highlighted the difference between the state, which relates to government and power, and society, which relates to communities and families. It was possible to have a state without society and have society without the state. Religion could be a blessing or a curse depending on the level it reached. If religion was just involved in society, it could be a force for good, sustaining society, encouraging altruism, responsibility and human decency. If the influence of religion reached a state level, it could be more of a curse, with Lord Sacks identifying problems concerning religion and power. While it was possible to have a big state without religion, it was not possible to have a big society without religion.

In the second of the opening speeches, Lord Harries, a retired Bishop of Oxford and a current Crossbench Life Peer, began his remarks with a reference to the debates in the 1960s. Then it was predicted by some that as western societies progressed, religion would inevitably disappear. Yet today, as the United States shows, religion still maintains a significant presence in society.

Lord Harries argued there is a need to understand the difference between a ‘secular age’ and a ‘secular society’. A secular age describes the society we live in today. Charles Taylor, in his book A Secular Age, argued that the reality of God in 1500 was a given and the thrust
behind life, whereas today religion is simply one point of view among many. The secular society is a model of how political structures should relate to religion. It is a model that someone deeply religious can believe in. There are, however, different concepts of what constitutes a secular society, for example those of John Locke, who argued for a society which is free for religion, and Voltaire, who argued for a state freed from religion. Lord Harries said that his own model of a secular society is based on the work of Amartya Sen. This model argues that all religions should be treated equally, however distant or close to the state they are. This approach can be found in the funding of faith schools in the UK: all faiths can apply for funding.

His speech then moved onto the role of established religions, such as the Church of England. In societies where all religions are treated equally, he asked, can the ‘symbolic privilege’ of established religions be justified? In answer, he said that all states have inherited a particular history and culture that have led to the present situation and no set of arrangements is value free. Is there anything wrong, he added, with such a symbolic position if all religions are treated equally, that is if all human religious rights are fully respected?

Lord Harries then reflected on the entitlement of religion having a voice in the public sphere. He referred to John Rawls’s concept of ‘public reasoning’ in the public sphere and the goal of an ‘overlapping consensus’ of values but added that there were difficulties in achieving this. He also mentioned the work of Michael Sandell who, in his Reith Lectures, had said that morality was lacking in society. He had argued that economic and social liberalism had hit its limits in this. By way of example, Lord Harries mentioned a case in Germany where an individual had advertised for someone to be eaten. On the basis of social and market liberalism alone this could not be objected to, because the person had given their free consent to be eaten. Sandell continues to believe in the need for a consensus, saying ‘fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread.’

Lord Harries pointed to a number of other secular thinkers who are calling for a much stronger moral framework for our economic and political life such as Tony Judt and Jurgen Habermas. He agreed with Habermas who had spoken of the ‘unexhausted force of religion’ but it was a force that needed to find a way of translating its morality into public reasoning. He ended by arguing that the current disagreement between proponents of a secular ethic and a religiously based one was misconceived and unhelpful. Common ground could and should be found.

The third opening speaker was the political philosopher Lord Parekh. He warned against basing the discussion on a concept of religion derived solely from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In particular, this implied a monotheistic approach. Yet there were religions that were agnostic (Buddhism) or even atheistic (Jainism). It was necessary to take a broader view of religion, accept that not all are dominated by a concept of “God”, and recognise that even theistic religions differed in their conceptions of God.

Lord Parekh argued that religions have four dimensions, a system of beliefs that seeks to explain the world, a sense of community, a source of values and a basis for social and political order. The contemporary resurgence of religion was not uniform, but rather different societies and individuals were turning to religion for different reasons and required different responses.

Historically speaking Europe had known only one religion, namely Christianity. Its so called religious wars were basically sectarian in nature. The only other religion it confronted was
Judaism, which it marginalised, subordinated and persecuted. The idea of the nation state that developed from the 18th century was based on the unity of belief or shared moral outlook which the government sought to foster.

The situation changed dramatically with the arrival of Islam in Europe after the Second World War. As Muslims settled down, they demanded equality of treatment. They also refused to privatise Islam and demanded a share in shaping the public sphere. This was new in European history and naturally created an agonised debate. The European intellectual and moral tradition lacked the necessary resources to meet this challenge, and hence a sense of moral panic. Different European states expressed and responded to it differently. The French debate on the head scarf and later the burqa represented one extreme. Holland, Germany, Denmark, and others showed milder versions of this panic.

The U.K. took a more pluralist view of Islam and sought to accommodate its demands. This has provoked three criticisms. First, some argue that Britain ‘pampers’ Islam and should treat it no better than Christianity. Second, some others argue that Christianity is woven into the cultural life of Britain and is central to its identity in a way that other religions are not. Britain therefore should give a privileged status to it. Thirdly, for some others Britain should opt for full blooded secularism, disestablish the Anglican Church, and remove all symbolic and institutional ties with religion. This is the only way it can ensure equal treatment not only to all religions but also to believers and non-believers. Lord Parekh briefly commented on each of these responses. The debate in the U.K. was not about whether Britain should be a secular state but of what kind.

Lord Parekh turned to the possible conflict between secular and religious values, and took the example of human rights. Equality was one such right. It implied that people should receive equal treatment irrespective of, among other things, their sexual orientation. This meant that gay couples should be able to marry or enter into civil partnership and adopt children. This went against the deeply held beliefs of religious people. If we insist on equality, we have to override these beliefs. But we then run the twofold risk that the state weakens its legitimacy in the eyes of religious people, as also that the latter no longer feel committed to human rights and see them as part of the secularist agenda.

Lord Parekh concluded by saying that it was not enough for religious persons to insist on their position on the ground that it was a deep and sincere belief. He felt that a great many beliefs could be described in these terms. Rather every belief, religious or secular, needed to defend itself in the public square on interpersonally understandable grounds, not by reference to a transcendental source. If some religious people said that racial or gender equality went against their deeply held beliefs, we would rightly disregard it. Homophobia may be seen in similar terms.

In the discussion that followed, there was broad agreement that consideration of the interaction between religion and politics required the use of measured language in order to show respect both towards those who held religious beliefs and to those who did not. Speakers considered levels of religious involvement in the public sphere and the extent to which such involvement should be limited. The need for faith and politics to be able to co-exist was stressed.

Some contributors felt that religion in politics could impact negatively upon political decision making, citing the example of George W Bush during his presidency of the USA. Others felt it was a mistake to treat religion as a direct causal force. Rather, religion should be viewed
as a body of ideas, which people approached and interpreted on their own terms. It was not possible to separate religion from politics, as the changing political atmosphere was inherent in how religion was interpreted and what was done with it. As an example, there were remarks within Islamic scripture which were ignored for centuries, but which have become relevant and potent in today’s world.

Some felt that while a secular state was a pre-requisite, religion required a voice in the public sphere. This voice could be distinguished from actually holding power; an example being William Wilberforce, who never held office, but dedicated 40 years to campaigning against slavery. This view was echoed by several speakers who argued that while religion should have a voice on social issues, it should not necessarily have a vote in politics per se. Concern was expressed about religions becoming pressure groups for their own adherents.

There was brief consideration about the role of the established church in the United Kingdom. The voting tendencies of the Bishops in the House of Lords were alluded to. Some felt that the privileged position of the Church of England worked because the Church allowed debate and space for other religions. It was noted that the Church of England had limited funding when compared to other established churches across Europe.

There was some discussion on the way in which women were treated by different religions. Several speakers felt that the rights of women had been poorly treated by different religious traditions and that the concerns of women were often the last to be considered.

A number of speakers highlighted the positive role which religious faith had in inspiring people to action. In his recent visit to the UK, Pope Benedict XVI had said that religion was seen as a problem by some people, when it should be seen as an opportunity to solve other problems. Religion was seen by some as adding a moral dimension to political considerations. The need for this in relation to economic decision making was key and the role of faith groups in supporting initiatives such as the Living Wage was highlighted.

However it was also noted that the moral dimension in religion was not a given: the same Christianity which motivated aspects of Thatcherism (self-reliance, economic liberalism) could also motivate politics based on social welfare and state intervention. It was stated that conflict did not always take place between different religions, but actually between tolerance and fundamentalism. It was noted that although society could at times appear tolerant, in times of social and political hardship societies could fall into fundamentalism.

There was a growing concern about fundamentalism, although it was argued that the problem was not necessarily greater at the moment, but that advances in communications technology had made people more aware of it. There was discussion concerning the Muslim faith and a danger of the state viewing all Muslims as potential fundamentalists. Concern was also expressed about state involvement in the faith of Muslims that proscribed which preaching and practices were viewed as acceptable.

Regarding all types of religious fundamentalism, it was noted that issues such as terrorism did not come directly from religious teaching, but that those involved in such activities may cite religion as a justification. The role of religion, in providing a sense of identity and belonging, was discussed. This could be in relation to individuals with fundamentalist religious views, but could also relate to all forms of religion. It was noted that on occasion the ‘religious leaders’ promoting certain views could be self appointed and did not actually represent the views of all those who shared their faith.
The issue of multiculturalism was discussed. Several speakers expressed surprise that what was seen as the purpose of multiculturalism, tolerating difference and facilitating integration, appeared to be disputed. Some contributors felt that attacking multiculturalism was a coded way of attacking Islam, and noted that multiculturalism was necessary and inescapable in today's world. There was general agreement that the equal treatment of systems of belief was problematic. It was better to look for equal treatment of individuals, and to include within this, respect for their religious convictions.