

The Mission of the Church on Life Matters in Contemporary Australian Society

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In the Second Letter to Timothy one reads: ‘Proclaim the gospel, insist on it in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, do all with patience and in a manner that will teach’ (II Tim 4:2). This is always the Church’s mission, not least of all concerning the value of human life. However the challenge it faces in any age and any place is to fulfil its mission in a manner which will teach, and more specifically, how it might do so in Australia today, in a secular age and when perhaps confronted by what Cardinal Ratzinger called in his final address before being elected pope, ‘a dictatorship of relativism’.¹

The Australian Context

On December 21, 2007 a feature article appeared in *The Australian* entitled, ‘Beliefs don’t deserve the force of law’, and subtitled ‘The faithful have no right to impose their moral codes on the rest of the community’. It illustrated something of the difficult context in which the Church in Australia is struggling to find the right voice with which to speak about its ethic of life. The concern of the author was that law and religion were supposed to be ‘separate’² in a secular state like Australia, and yet people were arguing from a Judeo-Christian basis for Australian society and drawing consequences for the law.

He claimed to be ‘enraged’ because, as he saw it, believers were insisting that their beliefs should become the law of the land. They wanted the power of the state to be used to force him and others to abide by their particular moral views, which for him were ‘all based on faith, and by definition there is no

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1. ‘Future Pope’s Homily for Conclave Opening’, *Origins* 34:45 (April 25, 2005), 720.
 2. Michael Costello, ‘Beliefs don’t deserve the force of law. The faithful have no right to impose their moral codes on the rest of the community’, *The Australian* (Dec 21, 2007), 10.

reasoning with faith'.³

For this writer and many others, law and religion should be separate because the state should be neutral on matters of religion. 'Separate' often means unrelated or having no connection with each other. But if the law enshrines values and ethical positions, then religions which likewise enshrine values and ethical positions cannot but be concerned about such laws. More fundamentally, religion is sometimes perceived as not being reasonable because it is based on faith: 'there is no reasoning with faith'. Obviously for Catholics faith is always reasonable and to this their extraordinary intellectual tradition attests.

In addition, religions are pictured as trying to enforce their moral views upon others. Normally, when Catholics participate in debate about life issues in contemporary Australian society and about laws covering such issues, they are only entering a rational conversation using reasonable arguments in order to so convince others that they will support the same position in the political and legal arenas. If they have recourse to any other methods to have their views prevail, they may well deserve such criticisms. Wanting others to abide by one's beliefs is not the same as enforcing one's moral views upon them.

Why is it so hard for Catholics to be seen simply as reasonable participants in a national debate about moral issues? Why are they seen as authoritarian enforcers of their own peculiar moral code? These are key questions confronting the Church in Australia today. They are also being faced in many other countries.

Bishop Donal Murray of Limerick echoed a similar concern last year at a conference in Ireland, in a paper entitled 'The Secular versus Religion?' He claimed that there is an assumption that 'if a person's views on social issues have been inspired and nurtured within a religious tradition, they can have no place in a rational discussion about what is best for our society'.⁴ He went on to say that this does not seem to apply to people who are agnostic or atheist, whose views are also based on assumptions not shared by everybody.

A Secular Age

In his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*,⁵ Charles Taylor shows just how complex is the cultural context in which Australian Catholics are trying to speak, and in which they confront such an entrenched prejudice. He chronicles not so much a simple story of the rise of unbelief as a result of the scientific worldview, which in fact he debunks, but rather the changing conditions that made unbelief possible. Where unbelief was almost impossible five hundred years ago, for many, belief now appears to be almost equally impossible.

Religion itself played a part in this according to Taylor, not least of all through its passion for reform which contributed to the disenchantment of the

3. Ibid.

4. Bishop Murray, 'The Secular Versus Religion?' *Origins* 37:26 (Dec 6, 2007), 412.

5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

world, and which reached its high point in the Protestant Reformation.⁶ This is acknowledged by Alister McGrath in his *The Twilight of Atheism*: ‘The Protestant reluctance to picture God has all too often led to an envisaging of the world that is bleak and barren, where it ought to be saturated with the radiance of the glory of God.’⁷ It was a small step, he argues, from declaring that God cannot be pictured, to suggesting that God cannot be conceived as a living reality at all.

McGrath is Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and a professor of historical theology. In describing the atheism of his youth, he made the point that atheism did not present itself to him as simply a ‘godless worldview’.⁸ Had it done so he would not have been attracted to it. Rather, he was drawn to it because within it there was a proposal to change the world. This would involve liberating society from its chief enemy and oppressor defined as God or religion. Atheist writers offered a view of a brave, new human integrity which was without any illusion about humanity, and was not blinkered by the superstitious beliefs of Christianity. All of this happened within the context of a study of science which purported to offer a perfectly adequate explanation of everything.

What is important here and is very clear in Charles Taylor’s work is that one very powerful reason atheism and a completely secular world view have dominated in some parts of the West is because of a desire to be freed from the constraints of religion, which is perceived so negatively. This is very important for those seeking to address our contemporary culture. If Catholics act or speak in a way which reinforces this caricature of them, they have no hope of being heard.

What is also clear from a reading of Charles Taylor is something on which Archbishop Rowan Williams commented in a paper at Georgetown University in March 2004. He was reflecting on a proposal in the United Kingdom that religious education in schools should also include some attention to atheism and humanism as ‘non-faith belief systems’. He pointed out that in the background was ‘the pervasive assumption of modernity that the intellectual default position is non-religious’;⁹ whereas, in fact, ‘non-religiousness is historically and culturally a complex of refusals directed at specific religious doctrines, rather than a pure and primitive vision invaded by religious fictions’.¹⁰ Given this, either religious education would have to locate non-religious positions in relation to what it is that they deny, or it would end up treating atheism as the only position not subject to critical scrutiny.

In Australia today, secularism/atheism is often seen as the normal version of what it means to be human or as one aspect of a kind of pure humanity.

6. *Ibid.*, 70-80.

7. Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 212.

8. *Ibid.*, 177.

9. Rowan Williams, ‘Analyzing Atheism: Unbelief and the world of Faiths?’ Georgetown University, Washington DC (Manuscript).

10. *Ibid.*

Religion is then seen as a personal choice which alters the norm. Whereas being religious or being secular are two alternative ways of being human, each of which deserves to be respected and can be challenged to justify itself intellectually.

Relativism

Last year a symposium was sponsored by the journal *Common Knowledge*, entitled 'Dictatorship of Relativism?', in response to Cardinal Ratzinger's final homily prior to his election. In his introduction, Gianni Vattimo, professor emeritus of the University of Turin, showed just how serious the challenge can be from the Academy in our secular age:

I have only one question to raise: is relativism, as Ratzinger's homily depicts it, really so great a risk for civilization, for religion, for social cohesion? I mean, is it as great a risk as other risks with which (*qua* risk) it is in competition? In particular, I wonder if the laid-back, somewhat noncommittal, to-each-his-own, I'll-try-anything-once attitude of the pope's relativists is anything like so dangerous as the enthusiasm that certainty inspires.¹¹

He went on to cite the fervour of the Crusaders, the zeal of American 'theo-cons', and the certainty motivating Hitler's extermination of other races as examples of the danger of certainty.

According to Vattimo, the relativist could ask of people who are zealous in their opposition to relativism, whether a dialogue of any sort does not presuppose that the other might be right and that their side might be wrong. He believes that to acknowledge this would be to risk weakening their identity, and so to undermine their willingness to die for their belief or to kill, to maintain their identity.

Vattimo misunderstands the openness to the other that is integral to all ecumenical and inter-religious relationships. Utter fidelity to one's faith is compatible with utter openness to the other and what might be revealed by them and by God in an encounter with them, with whatever consequences follow even for one's own self-understanding. He does not seem to understand dialogue as it actually occurs among religious people.

During the symposium, Julia Kristeva, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Paris and a permanent visiting professor at Columbia University in New York, argued for a transcendence that is immanent and rejected normative conscience and normative presuppositions, in favour of participating courageously and appropriately in what she called 'the democracy of opinion'.¹² In this she was echoing Charles Taylor's description of the contemporary secular commitment to finding all human fullness, all

11. Gianni Vattimo, "'A Dictatorship of Relativism?'" Symposium in Response to Cardinal Ratzinger's Last Homily', *Common Knowledge* 33:2-3 (Spring-Fall 2007), 216.

12. Julia Kristeva, 'Rethinking Normative Conscience: The Task of the Intellectual Today', *Common Knowledge* 33:2-3 (Spring-Fall 2007), 213.

meaning, all transcendence completely within the human.

Not all scholars engaged in this symposium who, while largely from American universities were more widely representative, were trenchant in their criticisms of the Catholic Church which Pope Benedict XVI represented. Some were more irenic in their response. In most cases they were defensive of relativism, though many would give a much more nuanced, philosophical understanding of relativism than what is often popularly meant by it, that is, that all opinions are equal and, as it were, 'anything goes'.

Nonetheless, what this symposium illustrates is again that when people are responding in a way representative of our secular age to something that the Church has said through one of its official organs of communication, they often respond to what they see as an authoritarian and oppressive body which is very diminishing of true human flourishing. This is very important, as Catholics strive to find the right voice with which to address contemporary Australian society on life matters. If their voice appears authoritarian or in any way oppressive of others, they will only alienate their listeners even further given the view of religion dominant in the uncritical secular mindset.

Atheism Being Challenged

Some would question whether Catholics or the Church as such really can have a voice any more in public discourse, in the public square, because of the secular nature of society, the marginalisation of the Christian voice and the inherent difficulties involved in its being heard without prejudice. Others would argue that atheism and secularism are on the defensive at this point of history.

The recent spate of literature defending atheism such as Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*¹³ may well be a sign not of the flourishing of secularism and atheism, but rather of its contemporary vulnerability in Western society which is no longer modern, but rather post-modern. In a post-modern age, all mega-narratives are rejected and one is faced only with particular narratives and particular points of view. Among the mega-narratives that must come under threat in a post-modern age is the secular and atheist narrative.

Alister McGrath suggests in his little book, *The Dawkins Delusion*, that Dawkins' own work, and others like it, are designed to reassure atheists rather than actually to engage fairly or rigorously with religious believers and others seeking the truth. He sees it as evidence of anxiety and an example of a new secular fundamentalism. Fundamentalism arises when a world view is perceived by its adherents to be in danger. They lash out at its enemies out of fear that their own future is threatened.¹⁴

One of the examples that he put forward in his earlier work, *The Twilight of Atheism*, of a new religious context with which atheism and secularism must deal, is the rise of Pentecostalism. It has restored to Protestantism the immediacy of God's presence in the world which had been eradicated in many

13. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006).

14. Alister McGrath & Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (London: SPCK, 2007), 63f.

parts of Protestantism by the aggressiveness of the Reform. If medieval Catholicism enabled people to live in an enchanted world where they were in very immediate contact with the divine through the places and objects and times of their daily life, and the Protestant Reformation at its most complete left people without feasts or even a full sacramental faith, in undecorated churches with simply the unadorned Word of God, then Pentecostalism has restored to Protestantism, an extraordinary access to the divine through human experience itself.¹⁵ 'Enchantment' has returned and makes atheism/secularism much harder to sustain.

Charles Taylor also refers to the continuing and increasing popularity of pilgrimages and World Youth Day as further examples of a renewed religious sense in people.¹⁶ However, in Australia, there is no widespread recognition that secularism is a Western rather than universal phenomenon and, therefore, not typically human or certainly any sense that it is now losing ground. The opposite perception is more the norm. However World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney did challenge the apparent absence of God in Australian culture in a way that shocked some and delighted others.

At the end of 2006, the British public theology think-tank, Theos, which undertakes research and provides commentary on social issues and politics in Great Britain, produced a report written by Nick Spencer and entitled "*Doing God*": *A Future for Faith in the Public Square*. In their Foreword, Cardinal Cormack Murphy-O'Connor and Archbishop Rowan Williams quoted from Leo Tolstoy's *A Confession*: 'I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet. What I had lived on no longer existed, and there was nothing left.'¹⁷ They suggested that this 'moment of perplexity' which was true for Tolstoy in 19th century Russia was also true of contemporary British society. Even though he had accepted that religion was impossible for a serious educated person and had no place in public life, nonetheless his faith in 'progress' did not offer him wholeness in his world view, or provide him with the resources to confront the most important questions in his life.

According to the two archbishops, issues of belief and faith, and how the world ought to be perceived have rarely been as important in British society, and there is in this moment of 'collective confusion', the possibility of reassessing the importance of faith for individuals and society. They perceived many secularist commentators arguing that the growing role of faith in society represented a dangerous development, and themselves countered by arguing that public atheism is itself an intolerant faith position. They invited people to pay attention to what is actually happening in the United Kingdom and beyond, and to see that religiously-inspired public engagement can be radically inclusive and not sectarian at all.¹⁸ They summarised the argument

15. *The Twilight of Atheism*, 192-197.

16. *The Secular Age*, 515-517.

17. Nick Spencer, "*Doing God*": *A Future for Faith in the Public Square* (London: Theos, 2006), 10.

18. *Ibid.*, 11.

of the report as: 'faith is not just important for human flourishing and the renewal of society, society can only flourish if faith is given space to make its contribution and its challenge'.¹⁹

The report quotes the contrast between the sociologist, Peter Berger's comment in 1968 that religion would survive only in small sects in an increasingly secular culture to his comment in 1999: 'the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false: The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some case more so than ever'.²⁰

Participation in the Public Square

In the report Nick Spencer analyses and responds to the reasons why religiously motivated participation in the public square is resisted. The fifth argument is the classic one from the New Testament itself that one should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Religion should stay out of politics.²¹ This is the most regular argument used to exclude serious consideration of religiously motivated argument in the public square, not least of all in Australia. It shows no understanding of what is involved in giving to, or belonging to God and so what the text really means. By way of response, the report again quotes Archbishop Rowan Williams from an address he gave in November 2005 in the European Policy Centre, entitled, 'Religion, Culture, Diversity and Tolerance – Shaping the New Europe':

Western modernity and liberalism are at risk when they refuse to recognise that they are the way they are because of the presence in their midst of that partner and critic which speaks of 'alternative citizenship' – the Christian community ... the distinctively European style of political argument and debate is made possible by the Church's persistent witness to the fact that states do not have ultimate religious claims on their citizens.²²

For Spencer, the failure to make room for this dual citizenship places societies in grave danger of absolutism, either in the extreme of religious theocracy or state totalitarianism, both of which dehumanise their people. As he sees it, this is an error into which 'theophobic secularism' can fall.²³

He quotes Rowan Williams further, to the effect that when the Church is regarded as an enemy or as a private body that must be resolutely excluded from public debate, 'liberal modernity turns itself into a fixed and absolute thing, another pseudo-religion, in fact'.²⁴ Only continuing dialogue with the religious community will protect liberalism from becoming simply dogmatically secular.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 17.

21. Ibid., 35-38.

22. Ibid., 37.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 38.

Politics of Identity

In a chapter on ‘The Politics of Identity’, the report argues very clearly that whatever of the presumed liberal humanist consensus, in fact identity is very important in the contemporary world and religion is very much a part of people’s identities. More and more scholars are coming to recognise that people are inherently religious. It quotes Professor John Gray rather provocatively as follows:

Of all the myths spawned by the Enlightenment, the idea that we live in a secular age is the most absurd. Throughout much of the world, religion is thriving with undiminished vitality. Where believers are in the minority, as they are in Britain today, traditional faiths have been replaced by liberal humanism, which is established as the unthinking creed of conventional people. Yet liberal humanism is itself obviously a religion – a shoddy derivative of Christian faith notably more irrational than the original article, and in recent times more harmful. If this is not recognised, it is because religion has been repressed from consciousness in the way that sexuality was repressed in Victorian times. Now as then, the result is not that the need disappears, but rather that it returns in bizarre and perverse forms. Secular societies may imagine they are post-religious, but actually they are ruled by repressed religion.²⁵

Any attempt to evict religion from the public square, of which there are many examples in Australia and obviously in Great Britain, may only encourage the very extreme forms of religion that most frighten the classic secular humanist.

Public Reason

What voice then ought religious people find for themselves in contemporary secular Australian society? The report suggests that those who are motivated by religious faith need to argue their case ‘at the bar of public reason’.²⁶ They need to put forward their arguments in a reasonable and reasoning way that does not alienate those who do not share their motivations. But it also suggests that they should not accept public reason at its face value and should rather question its presuppositions.

Spencer argues that the intellectual foundations for public reason supplied by liberal humanism don’t stand up to intense scrutiny. They deserve that scrutiny and they should not be allowed to establish the criteria for what is reasonable in public discourse. Too often in Australia, as well as Great Britain, there is an implicit two-tier system at work in public debate. Some opinions are presumed to be obvious and shared by all, whereas others, certainly religious ones, are not according to the norm and therefore need to justify

25. *Ibid.*, 62.

26. *Ibid.*, 69.

themselves. Australian believers, Catholic or not, need to find a way of challenging this presumption.

The report concludes that public reason demands of religious thinkers who wish to participate in the public square that they should accommodate their language and reasoning to what is currently acknowledged as the norm in public discourse. But it goes on to say that ‘they should also be willing to challenge that norm, questioning axioms, confronting arguments and asking all parties, irrespective of their public identities, to justify their faith-based positions’.²⁷ This recommendation that our voice in the public square should be the voice of public reason with or without the caveat just mentioned, would be the view of countless commentators today. However, it needs some qualification.

Speaking together with Evangelicals

For example, a further question arises about direct reference to God in this discussion. The report permits one to talk about God in the public square, but only in such a way that it does not, as it were, domesticate God as part of a political argument.²⁸ This question deserves considerable attention. For a start, it arises in a very pressing way when we try to join our voice to that of other Christians, especially Evangelicals.

In October 2006 the American journal *First Things* published a Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) entitled ‘That They May Have Life’. Evangelicals and Catholics Together is an American group that strives to draw together these two large traditions within the American religious world. It is not surprising that one of the areas on which they were able to come together is the ethic of life. Their Statement illustrates the particular difficulties inherent in Catholics trying to find a common voice with Evangelicals.

While it is not yet as evident in Australia that Catholics and Evangelicals/Pentecostals can make common cause on many issues, it is beginning to happen and it is very important that Catholics learn the skills necessary to work effectively with these new partners. Though they may be able to stand together for the same cause, it is much harder for Evangelicals and Catholics to marshal their arguments together. While Evangelicals will speak normally from the text of scripture, though no-one’s reasoning is ever simply based on that, Catholics will draw on their natural law tradition, though obviously they too make reference to scripture, and look at their natural law tradition as believers.

This is not ignored in the Statement. It acknowledges that Evangelicals and Catholics have a long-standing difference in their understanding of the capacity of human reason.²⁹ Evangelicals, and Protestant traditions more broadly, have accepted that human reason has been deeply corrupted by sin,

27. *Ibid.*, 71.

28. *Ibid.*, 69.

29. ‘That They May Have Life. A Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together’, *First Things* 166 (October 2006), 2.

whereas Catholics recognise that human reason, while wounded and in need of healing, still has a capacity to discern truth including moral truth.

Three of the Catholic signatories of this Statement were George Weigel, Fr Richard John Neuhaus, and Cardinal Avery Dulles. They have been in a dialogue with Evangelicals for many years. Such a statement would be far more difficult to produce if the partners were Catholic advocates of social justice, not practiced in dialogue with Evangelicals as these men are, and the Evangelicals less familiar with Catholic thought.

In his little book, *Theopolitical Imagination*, William T. Cavanaugh summarised the reflection of Neuhaus and Weigel on this difficulty of finding a common voice with Evangelicals. He reported Neuhaus' claim that if religion is to gain access to the public square, it must do so with arguments that are public in nature. For Neuhaus the problem with the Moral Majority in the USA is that 'it wants to enter the political arena making public claims on the basis of private truths', that is, arguments 'derived from sources of revelation or disposition that are essentially private and arbitrary'.³⁰ George Weigel was also quoted as saying that those who enter the civil public square have a right to speak from religious conviction. But at the same time they assume a responsibility to speak in such a way that they can be heard. For Weigel this meant in concrete practice translating 'religious-based moral claims and arguments into concepts and language that can be heard and contested by fellow-citizens of different faiths'.³¹ These comments illustrate just how difficult it can be to reach consensus on the arguments rather than simply on the cause one is advocating.

Speaking As the Church

Cavanaugh himself argued against submitting to the laws for discourse in the public arena that come from the state itself. As he saw it, these make room only for individuals speaking out of their Christian formation, but not for the Church itself to enter into the public arena. The language of theology, which belongs to the Church, gives way to the language of citizenship which belongs to individuals.³² By speaking only a language that can be understood, one cannot communicate the full message of the Gospel that is radically subversive of the kind of humanism that reigns supreme in contemporary society and perhaps of any humanism that is not a full expression of the Gospel. The Church has more to say than the language of public reason enables it to say, and it has to find a way to say that more as well.

From a different perspective altogether, William L. Portier, writing some years ago about what he calls 'evangelical Catholics', argued that as the Church participates in society, it must be seen more clearly as the Church. He

30. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 36, quoted in William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 59.

31. George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 116, quoted in Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 60.

32. *Ibid.*, 65.

asked for a more evangelical theological language when Catholics engage in the public forum, for a re-theologizing of Catholic theology and specifically of natural law theory used to engage in the discourse of public reason.

The way forward for him was not to jettison natural law, but to re-theologise it. He cited as an example most forms of Catholic social teaching in the United States which he saw as being designed to be detachable from Catholic theology as a whole so that they can be put to 'non-sectarian' use in public policy debate. He claimed that this whole rich body of thought would remain unable to inspire people to evangelise culture in the name of Jesus Christ unless it received an infusion of theological energy.³³

These two men from two different perspectives illustrate the necessity for further serious reflection by Catholics on the very common choice of the voice of public reason for engaging with one's secular contemporaries. This voice has very obvious merit but it does not express all that the Church might want to say and does not make it easy to speak of God. How and when Catholics can do the latter without compromising their capacity to communicate with a secular culture is not immediately obvious in any situation, but while using the voice of 'public reason' they must not be afraid at times to speak of God because that remains their fundamental message.

Finding the Right Voice

In a little book called *Four Cultures of the West* John W. O'Malley sj analysed what he believes are four types of culture and four styles of human communication in the West. These categories offer another perspective altogether on the efforts of Catholics to find their most appropriate voice. O'Malley calls these four cultures prophetic, academic/professional, humanistic and artistic. The last named is not as relevant as the first three to this matter, though it is a very important 'voice' in other areas. When the Church is endeavouring to participate in the conversation in the public square, it can use the language or style of any one of these cultures.

When it uses the prophetic culture it does it with enthusiasm and utter conviction. This voice comes, as it were, naturally to it. O'Malley described this culture as 'the culture that must speak out', the culture of alienation, of protest, of standing apart.³⁴ Examples of those using this voice are Puritans, Jansenists, all those given to crusades, and fundamentalists, both religious and secular. This is the culture of the martyr, the fanatic, and above all, of the reformer.³⁵ He went on to say that this culture appeals to a higher standard willed by God. 'In a post-Enlightenment, more secularised context, the standard will take the form of an unquestionable First Principle, often in rights-language, the Right to Life or the Right to Choose.'³⁶

This voice comes naturally to the Church and there are times when it is

33. William L. Portier, 'Here Come the Evangelical Catholics', *Communio* (Spring 2004), 65.

34. John W. O'Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 7.

35. *Ibid.*, 7.

36. *Ibid.*

the most appropriate voice for it to use. There are also some within the Church who find it the most congenial voice and who find it very difficult to use any other. It is not often a voice that will persuade in the public square, though it has the capacity to shock and so expand people's awareness. When used too often about the same topic, it can lose even that capacity.

The language and style of the academic/professional culture is one also very congenial to the Catholic tradition and one which it uses very well, and which it must continue to use. One of the most important hallmarks of the Catholic tradition is its consistent intellectual rigour. If the Church can't argue its case in a way that can be recognised by the academy as cogent and reasonable, then it has no chance of convincing anyone. This voice, or language, or style will not necessarily be the most congenial for bishops when speaking in the public square, though what they say must be based upon it and provide evidence of it. To do this they must rely upon the assistance of Catholic theologians and academics.

The third culture to which O'Malley referred, what he calls the 'humanistic' culture, the culture of poetry, rhetoric and the common good, is more likely the voice which will be used most effectively by Catholics in the public square today. This is the voice that tries to persuade, to convince, to meet a person half way, to find common understanding, to dialogue. It demands mutual respect and courtesy. O'Malley pointed to the documents of the Second Vatican Council as an example of this culture. Without entering into the contemporary debate about how one should interpret the Second Vatican Council in which O'Malley is a very strong player, he is right in saying that precisely because the genre of discourse and of teaching in the Second Vatican Council is so different to that of Trent, there is such a debate today.³⁷

The documents are written in the style of no previous Council. It is a style that attempts to persuade and excite and inspire, without in any way failing to teach. O'Malley tellingly used the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes* as an indication of the language and style of the Council: 'the joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human that does not also affect them'.

This Christian humanism of *Gaudium et Spes* can be an appropriate style, language or voice for Catholics to use when trying to communicate in and to Australia's contemporary secular culture. This is true, even if some of those with whom they are speaking are dismissive or aggressive, even if some of those with whom it is attempting to dialogue have prejudices that are obvious to Catholics and not to themselves, and even if they claim all kinds of principles in their argument that they maintain are obvious and accepted by all, when they obviously are not. Andrew Murray in his little book, *What Can the Church Say?* argues similarly that 'the Church needs to work by persuasion,

37. Ibid., 176-177.

rather than by authority. It is one voice among many, and it will be judged as it is heard.³⁸

When it comes to legislation, a question arises about the appropriate goal of Catholics entering the debate in the public arena. Are they attempting simply to change the law? Or are they attempting to change the minds and hearts of people who will vote on the law, so that they might do so in a way that is more favourable to a Catholic understanding of the moral issues involved? This is a very important distinction. A statement of Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* is relevant to this discussion: ‘The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the state. Yet at the same time, she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument, and she has to re-awaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper’ (28).

Even though Pope Benedict was referring to work for justice, what he said applies to some extent as well to working for laws that will support a Catholic vision of human life. They too are a matter of justice. Should the Church be a political body engaged in political or legal action to bring about its desired ends? Or should the Church be a witness, a dialogue partner, a persuader, an inspirer, a teacher, with all the passion that can bring about a change of mind and heart? Perhaps Catholics are called sometimes to be both, but they have to be very wary about the Church becoming identified as a political agent, because it will be treated as such by those who oppose it and who will sometimes be even more ruthless than Catholics are able to be.

Pope John Paul II in speaking to the Canadian Bishops in 1999 challenged them to find a new voice for their contemporaries. His challenge applies to Australian Catholics as well:

To speak with clarity means that we must explain comprehensively the truth of revelation and the Church’s teachings. We should not simply repeat but explain. In other words, we need a new apologetic, geared to the needs of today which keeps in mind that our task is not just to win arguments but to win souls, to engage not in ideological bickering, but to vindicate and promote the gospel. Such an apologetic will need to find a common grammar with those who see things differently and do not share our assumptions, lest we end up speaking different languages even though we may be using the same tongue. This new apologetic will also need to breathe the spirit of humanity, that compassionate humility which understands people’s anxieties and questions, and which is not quick to presume in them ill-will or bad faith. At the same time, it will not yield to a sentimental sense of the love and compassion of Christ sundered from the truth, but will insist instead that true love and compassion

38. Andrew Murray, *What Can the Church Say? Politics and Religion in Contemporary Australia* (Strathfield: St Paul’s, 2005), 65.

can make radical demands, precisely because they are inseparable from the truth which alone sets us free (cf. Jn8:32).³⁹

Catholics in Australia are still struggling to find the right voice to participate in discussions on life matters in Australian society. Obviously there is no one voice appropriate for all on every occasion. They need to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of different ways of speaking. There are many prejudices to overcome and this can sometimes make it difficult to be heard fairly and accurately, but that is par for the course for Christians, and certainly at this point of history for Australian Catholics.

39. Pope John Paul II, 'Address to the Bishops of Western Canada on their *Ad Limina* Visit', 30 October 1999, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1999/october/documents/hf.