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Polytheism in our Public Lives

Mike Ovey (2006)

Imagine the scene. A new régime has brought change to your country. It is modernizing and forward-looking. It has forged a new path in foreign affairs...

The following is the text of the keynote address of the 2006 LCF Annual Conference, which was not delivered due to the speaker being, sadly, unwell and unable to attend.

"And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow Him.' And the people did not answer him a word." (1 Kings 18:21)

Introduction

Imagine the scene. A new régime has brought change to your country. It is modernizing and forward-looking. It has forged a new path in foreign affairs, building alliances and trade relationships with powerful economic players, securing prosperity for your country, new outlets for its goods and potential military help against new foreign threats. Your country has become less insular, more cosmopolitan, you might say, more sophisticated.

Naturally there has been a price tag. Old values and old ways have needed, well, modification. Alongside the old religion, for instance, a new one flourishes, and the country now, has, so to speak, the best of both worlds, worshipping the new god as well as the old god.

There are, of course, diehards. Rednecks who won't renounce the old ways, who divide the country and who block progress.

That, you might say, is the situation confronting the people of Israel in 1 Kings 18. The new régime is that of Ahab, son of Omri, pushing through the policies his father started: policies of rapprochement with the rich, but very pagan, city-port of Sidon. Ahab's chief wife is the Phoenician princess from Sidon, Jezebel, and she brings her pagan gods into Israel, so that they are worshipped alongside the God of Israel's fathers, Yahweh. Ahab, smart, astute, to the world's eyes very successful, and when it comes to principle, well, let's just say flexible. And his people are coming to resemble him.

Ahab and Elijah

But there is a fly in Ahab's ointment - the ministry of the prophet Elijah. It's Elijah who has announced the drought that forms the background to 1 Kings 18 and it's Elijah who seems to Ahab so obstructive, blocking the progress Ahab wants, dividing the people, 'troubling' them, as Ahab puts it in 1 Kings 18:17. You can imagine the frustration Ahab feels. Here he is dragging Israel into the 9th century B.C., modernizing as much as he can, introducing Israel into the family of nations, not denying Yahweh so much as giving people more options as to which god to worship when. And there's this regressive stick-in-the-mud, Elijah.

I suppose the theme of confrontation runs all through this section of 1 Kings 18, doesn't it? It's a little like the skins of an onion, you peel one off and there's another layer underneath.

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- It begins with the confrontation of v 17 - who's the real troubler of Israel, Ahab or Elijah?
- Then there's the confrontation between Elijah and the priests of Baal, that Elijah introduces in verse 22. Who has real access to divine power? Who's the priest or prophet of real religion?
- But ultimately, at the heart of the onion, if you like, this is a contest between Baal and Yahweh: who can send fire from heaven? Or, according to the terms of the contest set out in verse 24, who is the real God in Israel? And as we look at that third, final, confrontation it is clear Yahweh wins it. Fire comes down and consumes Elijah's sacrifice (verse 38), not the sacrifice offered by the rival priests of Baal.

'Both/and' or 'Either/or'?

But you find yourself asking, what exactly was this conflict about, what was Elijah's complaint? Well, he summarises it in v 21 doesn't he? He characterizes the people of Israel as people who limp along with two opinions. They're trying to say that 'both Baal and Yahweh are gods, aren't they?' It's a both/and attitude. In contrast, Elijah says it's either/or. Either Yahweh or Baal. Let's pause there. This is just one way that our culture starts to find this incident so very uncomfortable and destabilising. It's a truism to say we live in times of religious tension and a characteristic response that's grown up is to say something like 'lot of truth on both sides', 'we're all dealing with the same thing,' comments along those lines. But many of them boil down, don't they, to being a both/and attitude. Both Christ and Buddha, both Judaism and Islam, both Hinduism and the New Age. What we face here is a repudiation of both/and thinking that goes like that.

Why?

Obviously at the heart of this is the charge that Elijah and others brought that Israel was worshipping idols. Baal was an idol. And this charge, this sin, of idol-worship haunts Israel in the years before the Babylonian and Assyrian conquests. Now, passages like 2 Kings 17 tell us that this problem eventually brings God's judgment onto the northern kingdom of Israel. Given the utter seriousness with which God treats this sin, we ought to pay some attention to what it is.

For one thing, Israel's problem is not that she was an atheistic place or an irreligious place. There was plenty of religion going on in Israel. The problem was, it was sinful religion. It was not that Israel was a proto-type secular society. She was a sincerely religious, but wrongly religious society.

Idolatry and Spiritual Adultery - Hosea's lesson

I think we can see Israel's idolatry as having two forms, and the opening two chapters of Hosea illustrate this. Remember that in Hosea Israel is pictured as an adulterous wife (Hosea 1:2, 2:2 and so on).

- She is adulterous, first, in the ways she treats other gods: she goes after them, worshipping them, treating them in ways that are properly reserved for her spiritual husband, Yahweh (Hosea 2:6). That's obvious, isn't it? And committed Christians can still identify the worship of pagan god or goddesses in similar ways. The trouble with this kind of idolatry is that the alternatives to Yahweh just don't measure up. That's shown graphically in 1 Kings 18: Baal cannot intervene to bail his priests out - he's not there, he's a lie. Hence the Bible says don't fear these gods, don't reverence them, because they have no power either to save or to condemn.
- But, secondly, she is also adulterous in the way she treats Yahweh. That's more surprising isn't it? But it becomes clear when we look at the way God, Yahweh, wants Israel to change in her marriage with him. Look at Hosea 2:16. It deals with the way God wants to be addressed by Israel. He wants to be called 'my husband', not 'my baal', 'baal' being a word which simply means 'lord'. It's an intriguing

sentence. It's not that Israel has been refusing to recognise God at all. It's that Israel has been treating God as a 'baal', as some-one on a level with all the other baals. We can look at it this way. Israel's adultery has not taken the form of simply running off with another person and refusing to have sex with her proper husband. It's an adultery that's taken the form of having lovers and reducing her husband just to the level of another lover. She'll have sex with him, but on the same terms as the rest of the gang.

Now that second way of committing idolatry, committing spiritual adultery, is a bit more subtle, isn't it. There's no necessary denial of God being there, there may still be offerings of worship that are ostensibly addressed to Him. But when you stop and think about it, it's a pretty insulting form of address. Imagine how a wife would feel if the man who was her husband introduced her at a party as 'one of my girlfriends', and steadfastly refused to call her his wife. The insult lies in treating her as other than what she truly is. It's quite horrible to think of. It's an act of power, defining someone in a way that is simply not true. And so it is with the way Israel treats Yahweh as just a baal, just one of the string of boyfriends. The net result is that who Yahweh really is gets obscured by this misrepresentation, this lie. The lie gets in the way of seeing who God, Yahweh, really is.

The Early Church was very familiar with some of these ideas about idolatry and its seriousness. After all, it was faced with a huge range of idols of various forms all around it, and the Biblical idea gets analysed with quite a bit of sophistication. For Tertullian, writing in the beginning of the 3rd century, idolatry happens when something comes to stand for God, stand in front of God, you might say, obscuring Him.

Some of those things that stand in front of God or stand for God will be very obvious types of idolatry: worship of the moon or sun or stars. These things, of course, are good and valid in themselves - the problem comes when they are treated as what they are not, something more than merely created things. But naturally an idol doesn't have to be a physical thing, it can be an idea. Think of Robespierre and the Jacobins instituting a Reign of Terror in pursuance of their ideals. Haven't those ideals come to stand for God when men and women obey them so thoroughly and unhesitatingly in consigning their fellow-citizens to execution? More ironically, when the atheist Marxist creed of Stalinism dictates the deaths of millions of kulaks in 1930s Ukraine, hasn't an atheist idea come to exercise the authority that properly belongs to God alone?

Our idolatry?

Once we start to look at idolatry like this, we can see just how challenging Elijah is for us too. 'How long will you limp between two opinions?' He challenges us, naturally, by making us ask whether we are maintaining baals along with Yahweh in our hearts and lives, something that, while we might not call it God, we treat as God. By treating something as God, by letting something stand for God, I take it that we're talking about something that exercises an authority or influence in our decisions that properly belongs to God alone.

The vice, the idol, traditionally associated with lawyers is greed. 'Is that all you've got? I'll take it!' One of the partners in my father's firm took this as his motto, mainly humorously, I think, but still with an edge of disconcerting sincerity. Naturally we should look to see just how much profit has come to mean and the lucrative rewards of this profession. Other obvious idols that we may hold are those that are all too prevalent in our culture, the premium we put on comfort and leisure, the wreckages we seem ready to make of our marriages and families for the odd illicit orgasm. Or again that hard-won place of respect in the community that we won't imperil by speaking too openly of our beliefs in the Lord Jesus Christ. We should indeed

scrutinise our hearts to see if these typical idols of our time are there. It's not that lawyers are somehow more prone to these idols, it's rather that we're not immune from them.

Idols in the Law

But this morning I think I want us to think about a challenge that is more specifically for us. You see, most of the idols we've just been talking about are in our private lives, or very frequently so. They don't, perhaps, confront us in quite the same way in our public and professional lives. But it is worth asking whether we may not be starting to limp between two opinions in our public lives.

Let me point to one area where this seems to me to be an increasing danger for us. I refer to the area of human rights. I appreciate this may seem a very odd choice, for Christians have historically had concerns in these areas for all our shortcomings. One compelling witness in the Roman Empire was the care of the sick by Christians, rather than their abandonment. The Mediaeval period likewise displays notable examples of charity and worth extended to the marginalized. The 19th century in our own land was a time of intense activity, not just in Wilberforce's efforts to abolish slavery, but the work of Shaftesbury and others in factory legislation. Aren't we in favour of human rights, as Christians?

That is a motherhood and apple-pie question, of course. It depends what you mean by human rights. We need to unpack how complex this becomes with two examples. First, you may recall the strange case of Rocco Buttiglione. Nominated to be an EU commissioner, he was opposed because of his personal beliefs, not because of any policy that he advocated. In his view, while practising homosexuality was sinful, it should not be criminalized, a conventional enough distinction between moral evaluation and what should be illegal. Let me repeat, the grounds of opposition were not because of any action, past or proposed, of his in public office but because of his personal opinions and religious beliefs. In the outcry that debarred him from office, there was very little mention made in the media in this country about European commitment to freedom of belief, or, come to that, to UN commitments against religious discrimination. Instead, it was felt an intolerable insult to the gay community that a man with those beliefs hold such a post.

There again in the consultation paper the government published this year on sexual orientation discrimination regulations, a remarkable feature was the acknowledgement that rights to religious belief would be affected by this promotion of the right to have one's private life respected, and that the latter right would systematically trump the right to religious belief. No particular rationale was given. It was just that the gay right won out in the paper's proposals.

What both these examples share is the problem of rights in conflict with each other. And it starts to illustrate something remarkable about the way we have tended to conceive of rights. In practice such rights seem to be treated as things that exist independently of recognition by a particular state. They don't depend on a state for their existence, and it makes sense to us to say a state has breached human rights even when such a state denies their existence. In fact, even if all states denied their existence, I think we would still think that hadn't in any way abolished them.

Origins of Rights

Where do they come from then? Why are they there? Two routes seem to me possible. We might say with the American Declaration of Independence 1776, that humans 'are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights'. On this view, you and I hold rights because God gives them to us as our creator. They are

not ultimate things, paramount values, although they are certainly important. After all, their breach, felt the American Founding Fathers, justified dissolving 'the political bands' between them and the British Crown.

Clearly this route is not possible for secular atheism, or if you think that God cannot be appealed to in political discourse. This leaves the second route, which seems to me more and more evident in Europe's dealing with rights. It holds that human rights are just there. You and I hold them, it seems, just because we are human. On that view they become the ultimate metaphysical building blocks for moral and political discourse. We cannot go behind them, they're just there. They don't depend on our recognition, and we have no power to alter or abolish them. I find it intriguing that secular atheists seem so firmly committed to this metaphysical rather than materialist view, and also don't see just how religious it is, to spend so much time and effort on things like human rights which you cannot see, touch, taste, feel or smell. The National Secular Society has a deep commitment to freedom of speech, for instance. One might say, one should say, a deep faith.

Idols of Rights

As I listen to current discussions and arguments about rights, I must say that this latter route seems to me to be the one the UK prefers. Does it matter? Yes, profoundly. Let me make some observations about this secular faith.

First, it deals with gods. These gods may have no obvious temples, and no incense is burned on their non-existent altars, but they are gods. Why? Because they are treated as objects of ultimate importance that we should obey and to which our lives and thoughts must be conformed. Think back to the Rocco case: he was debarred from office for not conforming his thoughts to the propriety of homosexual lifestyles. At that point Tertullian's criterion of idolatry, that an idol functions as standing for, standing in front of the true God is amply satisfied.

Secondly, let me stress this secular idolatry deals with gods, not just one, but gods plural. The European Convention for example lists several human rights, freedom of belief, of expression, to one's private life and so on. And this is representative of such documents. Even the famous 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' of the American Declaration is in principle plural and part of an inclusive rather than exclusive list. This secular faith is polytheistic.

Thirdly, this secular polytheism is chaotic and full of unresolved and insoluble conflict. The late Isaiah Berlin identified an incommensurable pluralism. Berlin speaks of '...the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.' He felt that when you had great goals or rights and they were ultimate, then sooner or later those goals pulled in different directions. And you have no way of resolving the conflict, because each goal or right is equally ultimate. They are incommensurable in that sense. His favourite example is the inevitable, as he felt, conflict between freedom and equality. Sooner or later, one purchases the one at the expense of the other. In recent months Berlin would have had another example in the conflict between claims to religious freedom and claims to equal treatment irrespective of sexual orientation and practice that is evident in the Government's consultation paper on sexual orientation.

The 19th century writer Giuseppe Mazzini anticipates Berlin in some of this. His 1860 'The Duties of Man' starts with a consideration of why revolutions based on appeals to rights fail and turn again into corruption and oppression. Remember he is able to reflect by that time on the revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848. His point is that rights-based appeals sooner or later are based on the individual. The individual has rights, and they are his or hers automatically, and are, as the American Declaration puts it 'inalienable'. How can you rightly fetter something that is fundamentally inalienable? You cannot. Mazzini's sombre observation was that

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this meant an individual could not be bound by law to observe another's rights where they conflicted with his or her own. And conflict they will, as Rocco's case indicates.

It is not that in and of themselves, these rights are non-existent or wrong. It is that they have been conceived in way which creates conflict. G.K. Chesterton astutely observed:

'The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians care only for pity and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.'

What Chesterton is describing is the way virtues, rights, good in themselves have been set in conflict as warring ultimate values: it is a description of polytheistic chaos

What this means for us

Now think what that means for us. It means that a highly significant stream in modern law is deeply religious, polytheistic and marked by conflicts between our various gods, those rights which our culture has chosen to elevate to deity. To state the obvious, when I implement a law passed to give effect to these sovereign rights, am I becoming a polytheist myself, limping between two opinions as the people of Israel did? Sometimes, I am afraid, I may be becoming a full-blooded polytheist in my public life, as I implement these god-rights which directly conflict with the laws the one true God has passed. Recent actions by government really are at that level, aren't they? Think of the original forms of the Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill, the consultation paper on sexual orientation, or come to that recent arguments on the right to life.

Now I am very far from claiming that we would have unanimous views on all these particular issues. At a policy level we might draw lines at different points. What concerns me more is the sense that we have not seen that this is the question, whether we are becoming polytheists. If we have not seen that is the question, then how can we know when we have insensibly, but critically, passed in our public lives to that point where we have bowed the knee to the baal of gay rights, or the idol which silences our proclamation of the Gospel for the sake of public order, or the Moloch which devours the vulnerable but unprofitable members of our society. Elijah would remind us that there is one God in Israel, and Him alone we worship. So let me ask: are you sure you are not limping between two opinions in your professional life?

A Better way

It's not as though we have nothing to offer here. Mazzini puts it all this way:

'Certainly rights exist; but where the rights of an individual come into conflict with those of another, how can we hope to reconcile and harmonise them, without appealing to something superior to all rights?'

His concern is that solving conflicts between rights is finally only possible in a principled way by recognising that they are not ultimate. The answer is to note that rights are given, not self-existent, and that the reason why a right in my fellow man or woman must be respected is that God has imposed a duty on me, and He does so as my creator, my law-maker. As lawyers I suspect we feel the force of this appeal to duty. W.N. Hohfeld famously defined proper rights as strictly having correlative duties, and inevitably one asks the question who has the right to impose a duty on a human being, a duty as fundamental as the rights that we've been discussing. Mazzini's answer is, quite simply God.

'The origin of your duties is in God. The definition of your duties is found in His law. The progressive discovery and the application of His law is the task of Humanity.'

Put like that, there's no question of a divide between private and public, where our issues of conscience are confined to the private life, is there? This line of thinking makes the sovereignty of God and the Lord Jesus absolutely central in our public and professional discussions, and rightly so. Our faith is not an occasion of shame or embarrassment, something we hope need not come up. It starts to be indispensable if our lives and the law we practice are not to be marked by polytheistic chaos. And we would stop limping between two opinions.

At the date of writing, The Rev. Dr. Michael Ovey, a former Parliamentary Counsel, was Dean of Oak Hill Theological College where he lectured in doctrine, apologetics and philosophy.

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