

The Role of Chaplaincy in a Fragmented Society: Sociological and Theological Reflections

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A talk given to the Bolton Christian Community Cohesion 'Exchange 4' Meeting on Tuesday 29 September 2009 at the Bolton Hub. Phil Edwards welcomes responses on chaplain@bolton.ac.uk.

Introduction

These are reflections upon an experience of being a chaplain to students and staff at The University of Bolton, a higher educational establishment which has no religious affiliation. It is not only chaplains who reflect in this way but chaplains who work in places which have no religious affiliation have a unique role in reflecting upon the place of faith in today's society and how matters of faith can speak to people as long as we use the right language.

The religious-secular divide

Ever since Christianity came into being, it has 'baptised' the secular and non-religious; it has taken seriously people's religious and spiritual strivings in whatever direction and proclaimed that as a longing for the God known through Jesus. From Paul's declaration in Athens that "what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23) to the pagan winter festival becoming Christmas, Christians have made holy what is profane or secular. Today Christianity is divided between those who have separated themselves from the secular culture and those who want to continue baptising what is profane or secular. Those who want to make a distinct line between what is religious / holy and the rest of the world have played into the hands of aggressive atheists such as Richard Dawkins who give people a false choice between religion and science, between myth and rationality. These are false choices which some Christians and others of faith have fallen into the trap of fighting. We don't have to fight because belief in a Creator God means that everything is holy ("God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31).

Chaplaincy has, on the whole, sided with those churches and those religions which have not made a sharp distinction between the secular and the holy, between science and religion, between myth and rationality. Truth has many faces and can be mapped in many different ways. In theological terms, our ministry is in Galilee rather than the holy confines of Jerusalem; the market rather than the temple.

Reflecting on society

Chaplaincy ministry brings us face to face with many issues in society and brings us into contact with people of different faiths and none: those who are searching, the wistful agnostic (the don't know but would like to), the pagan, the humanist and the atheist; those who are open to matters of religion and belief, and those who are closed to new ideas (including those of faith as well as no faith). Because all our ministry is outside the church, we need to know where people are at. Our experiences of the people we meet tell us this. But to do some useful and helpful reflecting, we need the aid of those who study society in a professional capacity – we need the help of sociologists. Being a physicist by training and still a physicist at heart, I used to look down on sociologists and think that what they said was either obvious or nonsense. However, a few years ago I was asked to teach a class some sociology of religion and my prejudices were challenged. I found that sociology is very helpful!

One of the questions sociologists have been asking for nearly 200 years is ‘Why does it seem that religion is in decline in Europe?’ They proposed a number of possible reasons for the so-called ‘secularisation’ of society. Although there is disagreement about these reasons, each seems to have an element of truth, even if not the whole truth. I will mention three reasons:

1. There has been a separation of the sacred and profane; the church is the place where religion is practiced and everything else is profane and outside the jurisdiction of the church. If this is true, or even partly true, we can see the value of chaplaincy which operates in the ‘profane’. The very presence of chaplaincy is a sign that every aspect of life is sacred.
2. The presence of other religions has become more obvious: there is religious pluralism and when religions seem to compete in the market place, their status and authority is devalued. Chaplaincies which are multi-faith, such as at the University, challenge the idea that religions have to compete. We can be passionate about our faith and yet respect and even value and learn from other faiths.
3. The growth of scientific knowledge and method has undermined the credibility of religious interpretations of the world. But religion addresses the question of meaning which science does not. Some atheists such as Richard Dawkins attack religion by setting up science as an alternative to religion as I have mentioned above: either religion or science. But this is a false alternative. It is like comparing two maps of the world, a political map and a contour map: the two maps are of the same world, both are true but they give very different information. Chaplains are not the only people who can point out that this is a false choice, but it is a priority for chaplains in education.

Criticism of external authorities

In the 1960s society began to be critical of all forms of external authority: police, the medical profession, teachers, politicians – and this included the authority of the church, the authority of the Bible and the authority of tradition. All authority was questioned and those in authority were open to criticism. Today, it is a waste of time to say to people that they need to do this or believe that because the Bible says so, or because the Pope says so. Quite rightly, people ask, ‘Why’ and if we say, because it is God’s law, the question is repeated ‘Why’. God is another authority to be questioned. I have found it quite depressing to find that so many students have rejected religion because they have been taught that religion is only about following rules, which to them seem arbitrary. How ironic that our founder, Jesus, criticised those who saw religion simply as following rules and was probably killed because he was critical of the authorities of his day. Yet so many people have been taught that religion is about keeping rules, not about becoming fulfilled; about following commands, not about living life to the full (John 10:10). Chaplains are able get alongside people in their day-to-day work, listening to their struggles and problems without being judgemental and without having any power. Many chaplains have no status within the sphere in which they operate. Within the University, I am not a member of staff, although treated as one. The chaplains are present in their institution by invitation, not by right.

Even with increasing secularisation and criticism of authority, many people still believe in God or some religious ideas and the phrase among sociologists to describe this situation has been “believing without belonging”; that is, people believe in something but don’t commit themselves by belonging to any group or church. It is interesting to note that over 50% of student at Bolton University describe themselves as Christian, nearly 70% as having some religion.

Public visibility of religion

Some sociologists expected religion to die out completely but this does not seem to be happening. In 1979 one sociologist began to talk about post-secularisation or a “return of the sacred”. But not only was the sacred returning, but it was ‘coming out’. There was a new public visibility of religion. Private beliefs were entering public life and challenging the secular space:

- People are more likely to protest publicly about films or plays or books (Exorcist, Satanic Verses, Gerry Springer).
- Political leaders and ex-political leaders have begun talking about their faith and it is more acceptable to talk about faith in academic circles.
- The reaction to such public visibility has been the attempt of the secularists to try to ban outward signs of religion whether the wearing of religious symbols (crosses) or the acknowledgement of religious festivals (Christmas). Some of this has been because those who are not religious don't know how to respond to the visible different religions in society and need more education about the different faiths.

In Universities, there has been a wide range of responses. The Vice Chancellor of Manchester University, for example, does not see any role for faith or Chaplaincy in a university. However, at Bolton, there is an acknowledgement that many staff and students are religious and we need both to cater for their needs (especially to attract more students) and also to celebrate diversity. At Bolton we hold a Christmas Carol Service not in a separate room but in an open space within the University. Chaplaincy can educate by example and show that it is possible for people to celebrate and acknowledge the different faiths and beliefs we hold.

Bolton University has a policy on “religion and belief” (the government’s preferred phrase) and when I was shown the first draft it had in the first sentence that the University was a secular institution. I queried that phrase: ‘Do you want to be like the institutions in France which ban all forms of religious life in public’? The culture in this country is very different. The phrase was changed to “...an institution with no particular religious affiliation”. The University is committed to celebrate all religions as well as cultures. What has no place in the public institutions is ‘proselytisation’: we share information and educate but apply no unreasonable pressure which compromises a person’s freedom.

However, the rise of secularisation is still seen as a threat to many religious people and an enemy to be fought. This reaction is partly responsible for the rise of religious fundamentalism, a movement which is present in all religions. There are many different forms of fundamentalism. Here I mean the tendency to regard anything other than own faith and practices as evil; a clear separation between the sacred and profane – and the profane is everything apart from my own religion. The work of all multi-faith Chaplaincies is a protest against this kind of religious extremism.

The rise of spirituality

There is now more interest in spirituality than religion; more commitment to issues of interest and personal development rather than to particular groups or organisations. Instead of “believing without belonging” we are in the realm of “spirituality without religion”. An increasing number of people now prefer to call themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’. This, it seems has come about directly as a result of the criticism of all external authorities. Instead of deferring to an external authority (whether politicians, religious leaders, the Pope or God) the goal is to have the courage to become one’s own authority. There is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations and a turn towards a life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences which are relational as much as individualistic. The subjective turn is a turn away from ‘life-as’ (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader etc) to ‘subjective life’ (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation. Religion has to do with the living one’s life in terms of external obligations, spirituality has to do with living one’s life in terms of the experience of one’s inner sources of significance and authority.

All these developments mean that, in this country, we are able to talk more freely about faith issues in public as long as we use the correct language so that people can hear what we are

saying. We can gossip the gospel but the gossip must be about the good in the gospel, not the evil in others. We can talk about Jesus and we will be heard; if we talk about sin, we will not be heard.

Troubled times

Today we live in troubled times. Terrorism, global warming, the recession, breakdown of family life and increased drug use result in people becoming full of anxiety. Large amounts of anxiety cause people to form tribes of like minded people – whether inside or outside church – which polarise society and work against cohesion. Such tribes start to look for scapegoats for their troubles. Scapegoating is a common human reaction from the time of Adam through to Jesus and to us today. Today we see people blaming anyone who is different for their troubles.

In such times we need people with a non-anxious presence who can give practical hope and show that there is no need to scapegoat anyone or any group. For Christians, Jesus is the final scapegoat. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 7-26) is a story of hope in action. The Samaritan woman – different faith, different sex, probably divorced several times, living with man who will not take her as his wife and so excluded by her neighbours. I suggest that it is not only the woman but Jesus who is changed through this encounter – he agrees to stay in the woman's village for two days.

Chaplaincies which are multi-faith show in a practical way that we don't have to scapegoat other faiths for the problems and anxieties we face. We can work together, learning from each other and tackle problems together. Our faith need not be undermined by the other. In our fragmented society, Chaplaincies work with others of all faiths and none to bring about a greater understanding and greater cohesion.

Reflecting

In anxious times, we could easily react and retreat into our different tribes. What we need is much considered reflection, so that we respond positively. When Jesus was faced with the woman who committed adultery, he took his time to respond, writing on the ground. I like to think that he was weighing up the situation, refusing to go with the crowd yet wanting to make a statement about the human situation. Deep reflection stops us reacting in unhelpful ways; deep reflection helps us to challenge what we thought previously was precious and sacrosanct. Chaplains have to reflect deeply, because they cannot withdraw into familiar territory. We are always questioning and are being challenged ourselves.

When we tell people about the essence of Christianity, we may use familiar phrases, such as "Jesus died on the cross for our sins". But such language and phrases don't make sense to most people today. 'Jesus died for our sins' is not the whole gospel. Jesus had a life as well as a death. Christians in the east, Orthodox Christians, don't focus so much on the cross; rather they focus on resurrection as a sign of the divine energy in all of us. One Christian theologian and saint wrote that "God became man that man might become God". I suggest that focussing on the life of Jesus will have more impact upon people than focussing on his death. People want to know how to live, and die, well and Christians can talk about Jesus as the one who can transform lives. The experience of Christians is that Jesus transforms lives, which is what the sign of the wedding at Cana in Galilee points to and sets the scene for the whole of John's Gospel.

If we focus more on living out that hope in action which Jesus showed in his life combined with pastoral care, rather than believing particular doctrines, we will communicate more effectively what the Christian Gospel is about and work towards the cohesion of our society and the transformation of individuals.