

**Faith and Secularism in the Public Square**  
**Talk by His Eminence, Thomas Cardinal Collins to the Canadian Club**  
**March 28, 2012**

I am very glad today to be here to speak to the members of the Canadian Club on an issue which is of great importance within our society: the encounter between faith and secularism.

**I: The Meaning of “Secularism”**

Secularism, of course, needs to be defined. Many hefty books have recently been written on this subject; in this short talk I will not go over the various permutations and combinations of “secularism”. The term “secular” itself simply means “of this age”, and it is commonly used by Christians to refer to the immediate context of the life of discipleship – here and now, in this time and place.

For example, I am a secular priest. I was ordained, not be a monk living outside of the bustle of the daily secular round, but rather to be a priest serving those involved in the daily struggles of this world, in the various activities that a person engages in from birth to death, in commerce, and social activity, and family life, and all of the other things which come under the spiritual care of the pastor of a parish.

The Second Vatican Council made the important point that the lay members of the Church find their distinctive pathway to holiness precisely by engaging in this world, by being secular saints. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the basic text of the Council that describes the nature of the Church, says: “The laity have their own special character which is secular. ... It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering these in accordance with the will of God. They live in the world, that is to say, in each and all of the world’s occupations and affairs, and in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life; these are the things that form the context of their life. And it is here that God calls them to work for the sanctification of the world as it were from inside, like leaven, through carrying out their own task in the spirit of the gospel, and in this way revealing Christ to others principally through the witness of their lives, resplendent in faith, hope and charity.” (*Lumen Gentium* 31).

What is known within the Catholic faith as the “baptismal priesthood” of all Christians means precisely their engagement with this world, offering that up to God as a “sacrifice of praise.” The Second Vatican Council, in fact, commits the whole Church to being engaged in the world of this age. The famous opening lines of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World state: “The joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, 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 which does not also affect them.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1). That manifesto is, in fact, acted on every day throughout the world by disciples of Christ, who are deeply involved in the secular world. This is true of people of other faiths as well, but I will speak mainly of the Christian, and specifically the Catholic Christian, tradition simply because that is the one with which I am most familiar. Christian engagement in the secular world, otherwise known as the baptismal priesthood of the faithful, is a fundamental element of Catholic teaching.

Of course, that is not at all what “secularism” usually means within the discussion of faith and secularism. Secularism is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary thus: “The doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state.” The term “secularism” itself is relatively recent; it was invented by G. J. Holyoake in 1851, to describe his philosophy. (The word “secular”, as in “secular priest” is first found in 1290.) A further nuance is added by the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary. Secularism is : “The belief that religion and religious considerations should be deliberately omitted from temporal affairs.” “Secularism” in this sense is clearly not what Vatican II is talking about; in fact it is the exact opposite, for *Lumen Gentium* teaches that religion and religious considerations should be deliberately introduced into temporal affairs, as the disciples seek to transform this world with the leaven of the Gospel. Here we have a clear conflict between two rival belief systems.

For a Christian, the secular is the setting within which all of us live during our brief journey through this

world. It is simply the stage, the arena, of daily life. For a secularist of the strict observance, a proponent of “secularism”, that stage is all that there is, and so religious considerations must be excluded as superstition that will eventually be outgrown, as humanity evolves. For a secularist of a more moderate type, religion may have a valuable role in the personal lives of some citizens, but in a pluralistic society it must be banished to private life, where it will not interfere in the serene unfolding of the life of the state, which is governed by a secular ideology uninfluenced by religion.

It should be noted, of course, that while secularism is often presented as a neutral framework within which the life of the state can occur, it is itself a belief system, not unlike a religion, with its own doctrines and rituals. Indeed it has its own priests and prophets. As the individual voices of particular faith communities are discouraged in the public sphere, secularism can become a type of established Church.

I will leave it to others to articulate the secularist positions more fully, but I will present today a few observations concerning the role of people of faith within a society in which both forms of secularism, the stricter and the more moderate, have strong advocates, and in which various forms of the secular argument are assumed as normative in the courts, the legislature, the media, and in the world of public opinion. I would hope that a person without religious faith, or a person who believes that religious faith is a strictly private matter, would nonetheless recognize the value for society of the active presence of the religious voice in the public square, within the world of this age in which we all seek the common good.

## **II: Three Beneficial Effects of the Active Presence of Communities of Faith within Secular Society: Charity, Diversity, and Challenge**

### **A: Effective Charity**

Numerous faith communities in our own society see faith as providing the necessary context for their heavy engagement in the life of this secular age. Their engagement arises from the vision of faith, which gives them direction, and which leads them to be energized by hope in the midst of suffering, and to be impelled to perform effective acts of charity. This, of course, is not the perspective of a person who believes that this age is all that there is. But look around in our society. It is the numerous voluntary associations which are motivated by a vision of a world beyond this one which are very often most active in providing practical care for those who are most vulnerable.

There is a famous anecdote about a nun involved in serving the poorest of the poor in a most horrible situation. Someone came to her and said “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars”. She replied, ‘Neither would I’. It is that kind of motivation guided by the vision of faith that leads to practical charity. These communities of faith actively engaged as are few others within this secular society, the world or this age, are essential for the wellbeing of our local community, of our province, and of our community. This will be increasingly true as economic problems mount, and government budgets are cut.

### **B: Healthy Diversity**

Biodiversity is vital for the health of forests, and something analogous is vital for the health of society. There need to be vibrant voluntary associations of many kinds occupying the level between the government and the individual. In practice, very many of these are shaped by the perspective of faith. But in Christian faith, such small communities have a theological foundation.

We are called to come together in communities of love, modelled on the Blessed Trinity, in which each individual is engaged in relationships of justice and sacrificial love with those within the community and beyond. Neighbourhood, parish, and local associations: all of these are small communities that operate according to what Catholic social teaching calls the principle of subsidiarity: issues in life should be first addressed at the local level, where people know one another, and can see the face of those affected by decisions. This leads to people being treated as persons, and not as things, which is what faith requires

of those who are called to see the face of Christ in one another. Only if an issue simply cannot be dealt with at the most local level should it be handled by the higher, more distant, levels of government or business, where the perspective is more impersonal. A society is healthy when a rich diversity of voluntary communities flourishes within it.

The fundamental, and natural, small community is the family. Parents have the primary responsibility for the well-being of their children. For practical reasons, they may delegate dimensions of that responsibility to the state, for example in the organization of educational matters. It is troubling, and a sign of a society that has lost its moorings, if the legislative, executive, or judicial organs of the state act as if they have the primary responsibility for the upbringing of children, and over-ride, without an extremely good reason, the rights of parents.

Many different groups, very often motivated by a vision of faith, are involved at levels between that of the government and the individual. It is important as we look at the world of this age, at the secular world, to foster a healthy ecology of intermediate institutions which flourish within the greater reality of the state. If those intermediate institutions and communities are diminished, leaving simply the individual and the government with little else in between, then we are all in deep trouble

### **C: Prophetic Challenge**

When we reflect upon the role which both communities of faith and individual believers play in a healthy society, we should also consider the benefits of a fruitful relativizing of state authority, in the sense that it is unhealthy for us all if government authority is seen as absolute, and covering all aspects of the human condition. People of faith must obey the legitimate law of the land, and are all the more motivated to do so in a democracy since they can participate in its formulation. St Paul says: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God." (See Romans 13:1-7)

But for one who worships God, the authority of the state is relative, not absolute. People of faith assert that limitation in temporal authority, precisely because they consider that all authority ultimately comes from God. This is why the Roman Emperors were suspicious of Christians, because they would not participate in the Emperor cult, which was in many ways as much a political as a religious institution. They would not say "Caesar is Lord." Many Christian martyrs offered their lives rather than accept the total authority of the state. That position can be traced back to Jesus himself: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21)

The classic saint representing this Christian position of limited civil obedience is St Thomas More. He was very much engaged in the secular world of his age, as lawyer, bureaucrat, ambassador, judge, and politician; he was a true and loyal citizen.

And yet, when his principles of conscience, which were guided by values beyond that of the secular world, were challenged by the King, he famously died 'the King's good servant, but God's first'.

That apparently subversive 'but' is a sign of the prophetic spirit cherished by people of faith. On the surface it would seem that it made Thomas More deficient as a citizen. But that is not true. The fact that the stars he steered by were beyond the horizon of his age allowed him, in fact, to contribute more fully to his community, and paradoxically be a more faithful servant of the king, more faithful than those who gave the king unreserved obedience. The vision of faith makes possible a critical distance that sometimes is controversial, but ultimately fruitful.

This same phenomenon is found in other ages. The abolition of slavery came about, against great opposition, and against established law, and public opinion, because over many years people motivated by faith persistently worked to attain that goal. The same is true of the civil rights movement in the United States.

I would add that the majority in any organization or community may well be wrong; I think of a hero of

mine, St John Fisher, Cardinal Fisher, who was the only bishop in England to resist Henry VIII, as Thomas More was the only politician.

Those who assert the principles of faith even when they go against the prevailing spirit of the world, or public opinion, need to do so peacefully, and persistently. They propose, and do not impose. To use Christian terminology, they witness.

This may lead to controversy, especially if people of faith assert moral absolutes in a society attuned to relativism. They need to do so in the spirit of the great St. Francis de Sales, with clarity and charity.

Over time that witness, based upon faith, can greatly benefit society. One example, derived from the Catholic tradition with which I am most familiar, is the social teaching of the Catholic Church.

Monsignor Pecci was a Vatican diplomat who became aware of the horrible side effects of the industrial revolution when, at a very young age, he was made papal nuncio to Belgium. He then returned to Italy and spent over 30 years as Bishop of Perugia, ministering to people affected by the depersonalizing forces of his age. He was then elected Pope at the age of 68 in 1878, and lived to be 93. In 1891 he issued the first great papal social encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum*. Since then the social teachings of the Church (paralleled by a similar movement in the Protestant tradition) have led the Church to become deeply engaged in matters secular, from the perspective of faith, insisting on social justice, especially for the most vulnerable.

Those who espouse secularism, in the sense of the elimination of religious influence from matters of public policy, sometimes forget that the pastors of the Church and active laypeople are deeply involved in this secular world, addressing questions of charity and of justice, day by day, on the street. They walk the talk. In some countries, this has led to martyrdom. In our own country, the Antigonish movement, the co-operative movement, and the development of credit unions are all linked to the social justice tradition of the Church.

So in many different ways, believers are not inclined to leave their faith at home, or in the sacristy, nor to agree to the secularist assertion that the public square must be purified of religious input. Individual cases are often complex, and the particular questions in which the secularist and the person of faith may disagree vary greatly. But people of faith who, if nothing else, make up a large portion of the population in our democracy, will continue to propose their insights in the political process, and to act through the voluntary organizations without which our society would be a crueler place.

Catholics believe that it is the role of the Church, and of the lay people and clergy within the Church, to be engaged in acts of charity, and to attend to questions of injustice. In the earlier stages of the social teaching of the Church this largely involved justice within nations, particularly in Europe and in North America. More recently it has dealt with the global issues of justice, of the world of the northern hemisphere and the world of the southern hemisphere and of the great suffering that is found in that portion of the world where so many people are without the basic necessities of life.

### **III: The Dialogue of Faith and Secularism**

Those who strongly yet politely assert their principles can do so in a way that generates at least as much light as heat. In a healthy democracy we all need to listen attentively to views with which we disagree, and to offer our own in return.

Some obvious ground rules are helpful for everyone, if vigorous debate is to be fruitful:

- Listen first, and understand clearly what the other person is actually saying, and if possible try to grasp the context which illuminates it. There is a wise practice in marriage counselling that might profitably be employed in public discussion: let each person try to express fully and fairly what the other person is trying to say.

- Avoid vague or inflammatory language. When one strongly asserts a position, and strongly disagrees with that of another, it is hard not to demonize the other person, or to unfairly represent his or her argument. I cannot say what is required to attain the discipline of civil discourse in a person operating within the perspective of secularism, but in a religious perspective penitential discipline is required.
- Work together with the other person in another context that makes it possible to see the other as a whole person, and not as an abstraction or a caricature. This is one reason why discussion carried on over the internet can be destructive: pause before you hit that “send” button. The abstraction of computers can depersonalize our encounters.
- Ultimately reason is the bridge that allows people who disagree profoundly to come to some kind of common understanding at least of what the issues are and any kind of forum which will allow for that kind of reasoned discussion between people of different strong beliefs, whether they be beliefs of faith or secular beliefs, is very important in our society.

There is a spiritual danger that can accompany the prophetic stance of boldly challenging the evils in society. It is the danger of arrogance. The one who proclaims “Thus says the Lord” must be careful not to become drunk on righteous indignation. This is true of disputes within the community of faith, as well as of controversy with secularists in the public square. A famous preacher delivered a rousing sermon, and moments later a parishioner told him “That was a great sermon!” The preacher replied “You’re the second one to tell me that.” The parishioner asked: “How can that be? You’ve just finished the sermon.” The preacher said: “The devil told me first.” It occurs to me, though, that the prophets of secularism face the same problem. Perhaps everyone, before engaging in debate, should pray, in their own way, for a humble and contrite heart.

When people operating out of a faith perspective, or indeed people operating out of a purely secular and non-faith perspective, passionately seek to address contentious issues, then there is the potential for destructive strife. One solution to that, of course, is to simply tell people not to be passionate about the issues they are concerned with. Or one may say that there are no moral absolutes; if everything is relative, there is no point in arguing. That is no real solution to the problem.

A much better way is to have people find ways of maintaining their clear principles and the integrity of their inner convictions, passionately held, while at the same time working cooperatively with people with very different convictions in order to find some way of working through the difficulties which are there. Just as in the tradition of Christian ecumenism there has developed over the past many decades an ability to fruitfully engage people of different beliefs in dialogue, we need to find a way to do this in the dialogue between faith and secularism. People on either side of this divide are not going to simply cede the public square to the other. In any case, that is not useful or fruitful in a pluralistic society. Instead, these people need to be able to come together in the democratic conversation, with mutual respect. They need to learn how to respect difference, without abandoning principle.

Perhaps it would help to look at the historical path of ecumenical conversations. The first stage, in the 16th and 17th centuries, was one in which people believed profoundly and deeply about their different but divided visions of faith. They argued and eventually fought with one another, and from that came the wars of religion. That clearly is not the right way to proceed.

The second stage was what I believe to be a false solution. It is to say that if matters that we believe about very strongly have led to violence and war, then we should not believe strongly. If people have fought over opposing absolute principles, then declare that everything is relative. Who can fight over matters which are simply relatively important, and which we do not greatly believe in? We simply need to get to the lowest common denominator that we all can accept. But that is not a fruitful way to proceed, for

it leads to a swamp of relativism which has its own even greater difficulties.

The path which, after much painful experience of other ways, has been found to be more fruitful in discussions among Christians who do disagree on some very profound issues is to grant the reality and importance of the issues that divide us. We need to seek a way forward that respects the commitment to truth of each party, with no watering down of their deep convictions. Meanwhile, even though they profoundly disagree with one another, there are numerous areas in which they do agree and can work together fruitfully and harmoniously.

It is interesting that within ecumenism in the Christian tradition right now, some of the strongest bonds are found between evangelical Protestants and Catholics who very clearly disagree on some profound matters, and yet work together in peace and mutual respect. I believe that people of deep and differing faith can work better with one another than can people who have basically watered down their beliefs and are seeking the lowest common denominator. People of faith can disagree but work together, and I would think that that kind of dialogue between the world of faith and the world of secularism is very helpful.

There is a project initiated by the Vatican, called the Courtyard of the Gentiles, based on the place in the ancient temple in Jerusalem where believers and unbelievers mingled, in which the people of faith and people without faith are come together to discuss honestly and charitably the matters on which they do not agree. This could be a helpful model in our own community.

In our pluralistic society, faith and secularism meet in the public square. I cannot speak for secularism, but the voice of faith is not going to retreat into the world of private devotion. So we need to be able to listen to each other attentively, and to engage humbly and courteously in the democratic conversation, with mutual respect, for the benefit of all.