



Abraham Day 2018
How do People of Faith Engage in the Secular World?

Speech

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Good afternoon everyone and please allow me to add my own words of welcome to those we have already received. It is wonderful to see so many people gathered for this annual and very important event.

The topic which Rabbi Lieberman and Sheikh Agherdien and I have been asked to speak about this afternoon, is rather different from those which have been addressed in previous years. On those occasions the focus quite specifically on the ways our different traditions understand and honour the figure of Abraham, whom Christians speak of as “our father in faith”. This year instead we have been asked to consider a very different topic and one which is particularly relevant to our day to day lives. We have been asked to reflect on the question of how people of faith from the traditions to which we belong engage in a secular world.

As the Catholic Archbishop of Perth I am very conscious that even among the various Christian traditions present and active in Australia there would be different approaches to this question. Indeed even in our Catholic community there would not be universal agreement on this matter. What I hope to do this afternoon in these few words is explain how the Catholic Church, especially through its official positions, approaches this important question.

Catholics of course, like all Christians, begin with the Bible which for us comprises the Scriptures of the Jewish tradition and what Christians call the New Testament, that is, the gospels and the other writings which are collected in the New Testament. For us the Bible is not simply a collection of ancient writings. We regard it rather as the inspired Word of God. One of the Psalms expresses our understanding very well. Psalm 119 contains these words: *Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path*. Because the Catholic Church regards the Bible as *the Word of God in the words of human beings* – these words come from the documents of the Second Vatican Council - the work of interpretation, and sometimes the need for an authoritative interpretation, is an essential part of our Catholic approach.

We speak of the Bible as the Book of the Church and believe that it can only be fully understood within the community of the Church. We also believe that when necessary, and this may happen only relatively infrequently, the leaders of the Church, that is the Pope and the bishops, are able to guide us as to the correct interpretation of various texts. Sometimes this formal and authoritative interpretation concerns matter of doctrine and at other times it concerns matters of morality. This is part of the gift of God to the Church, his people. And it is this understanding which enables the Catholic Church to adopt formal positions on many of the contentious issues of our day and thus



maintain unity of beliefs at a time when there is very little common ground among the people of our time and in societies such as ours here in Australia.

Fundamental to the Catholic and indeed the whole Christian approach to life in secular society, is our belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This idea of course is first found in the book of Genesis. The vocation of human beings therefore is to give expression, as far as we are able in our limited human way, to the goodness, the wisdom, the compassion, and perhaps most of all the life-giving creativity of God, in every decision we make. Whether as individuals or as communities we ask ourselves a fundamental question: am I, are we, reflecting or obscuring and disfiguring the image of God in whom we are all created?

Of course we are all very well aware that we live in a secular society and also in a secularised society. A secular society is one which recognises and upholds the distinction between Church and State and certainly the Catholic tradition and many other Christian traditions support this position. A secularised society is a society which seeks to marginalise or completely privatise belief in God and the practice of religious faith.

For Catholics the recognition and acceptance of the secular nature of our society leads us to adopt a position very well expressed by Pope Benedict and more recently by Pope Francis. As Christians who believe in God, who believe in Jesus Christ, and who believe in God's Church, we also believe that our values, our principles and our teachings offer a precious insight into God's plan for creation and especially for human beings. We maintain that it is our duty, our privilege, and indeed our right, to propose our values and our convictions to the wider society in which we live because we believe that they offer the best way forward to ensure true human flourishing. But as Pope Benedict and Pope Francis both say we should propose ceaselessly but never impose, and we should do so humbly and respectfully but with conviction.

Of course at the heart of all of this is the most fundamental conviction of all, namely that God exists. One of the great figures of the Christian tradition Saint Augustine once wrote in the fifth century: *You have made us for yourself oh God and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.* The challenge of engaging in a secular society, and especially in a secularised society, is precisely the fact that the existence of God, and the centrality of God in the lives of human beings, is no longer widely recognised. This leads to a particulate challenge for Christians and I suspect for all people of religious faith.

The challenge is well expressed in some words of Saint Paul, one of the earliest Christian missionaries. In one of his letters he says this: *Adapt yourselves no longer to the patterns of this present world but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transform then you will be able to know the will of God and to do what is good, acceptable and perfect.* Because we live in a secular society, and again more specifically in a secularised society, we find ourselves immersed in a culture which does not always accept or support, or even tolerate, the values by which we seek to live. Unless we are careful we may find ourselves unwittingly accepting the values of the society around us and beginning to make them the basis of our daily lives and decisions rather than making our belief in God and our desire to know God's will the heart of everything. Jesus himself said all of this very well when he warned his disciples saying to them, "Be careful, because where your treasure is there your heart will be".



For me as a Christian, the challenge of engaging with a secular society is therefore this: in everything I do or say I need to make sure that my heart is in the right place, in other words based on the treasure of my belief in God, my belief in Jesus Christ, and my belief in the Church as a guide given to me by God. Unless I do this I will not in fact be able to offer the society in which I live my witness to the values which my faith teaches me offer our society the best and most fruitful way forward.