Witness and Presence

Encountering Secular Society by Putting the Last First

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It was Bernard Lonergan who placed “be attentive” as the first of his five transcendental imperatives on the way to human authenticity. Be attentive, that is, be truly present to people, their feelings, their ideas, their history, their values; be attentive to their ways of thinking and acting, to their total environment, both natural and cultural. That is, listen to, and learn from, all the voices. Authentic witness grows from being truly present; not easy in a polarised world.

What secular voices are we listening to? Put another way: What witness is the secular world giving us? Only then can we reflect on what witness we are giving, and ought to give, in the secular sphere. I write as a European who has been living for most of his life in a majority Muslim society.

Positive Voices of the Secular

It is good to consider the enormous benefits that secularism has bequeathed to the world before turning to a more critical reflection. We can recall the central role given to rational science and empirical knowledge, the advance of democratic politics and liberalized trade, the struggle for human rights and gender equality. Ongoing breakthroughs in science and technology have brought about unprecedented wealth across the globe. Emphasis upon the individual has freed people from restrictive ties within the extended family and debilitating cultural norms enforced by councils of male elders. Secular societies are governed by whoever the people elect, long replacing the religious oligarchies and interfering religious hierarchs of yesteryear. Vast migrations from village to city, from economically backward and politically unstable regions to the more prosperous areas of the world, have resulted in multi-cultural and multi-religious communities globally. Secularism has enabled us to see beyond ethnic boundaries and so create political entities founded on common human values rather than allegiance to a particular religion – India is not Hindustan nor

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1 The five imperatives are: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be loving. Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. (Originally published in 1957)
is Indonesia an Islamic State. Three key concepts are at work here.

**Secularism:**

For progressive religionists – Christian and Muslim – secularism is essentially about the State not interfering with peoples’ beliefs and worship, and religious authorities not dictating to the State. Religious truth is individual and personal, the choice of conscience. Secularism allows freedom of religion, is fair towards each religion and religious group, and supports tolerance in interactions between beliefs and forms of worship. Secularism does not privilege any religion; a secular society does not pressurize people in religious affairs. Nor should we.

We can distinguish between an “empathetic secularism” and a “suspicious secularism”. Empathetic secularism acknowledges the need to separate religious authorities from State authorities, and views beliefs (creed) and worship (cult) as belonging to the private sphere, protected by the principles of freedom and democracy. Meanwhile activities and ethical codes and social interaction (civilization) belong to the public sphere, overseen by the State in a democratic manner rooted in moral and public principles. Religious communities nurture a cultural space that insists on the priority of God. That is our witness too.

Experience suggests that while the private sphere is rarely negotiable, we can, nevertheless, dialogue about our beliefs and worship in a rational manner. We can share our experiences and beliefs about transcendent realities, and such honest dialogue will strengthen secularism, for we shall better understand and appreciate one another. Social tolerance is limited to the public sphere and does not impinge on the private sphere. Thus there is no hint of relativism.

There are a number of secular models available. Each country works at a secular model in tune with its cultural and religious traditions, increasingly within a pluralistic nation. A secularism that is dynamic and adaptable will result in a balance between religion and the State. This can be termed a contextualised, dynamic concept of secularism. Which model am I experiencing in my life and work?

“Suspicious secularism” banishes religion, its beliefs and morality, to the private sphere. This model is at work in some, but not all, Western countries.

**Liberalism:**
Intimately interwoven with secularism is the concept of liberalism. Liberalism is the acknowledgement of civil rights and civil liberties which are enshrined in the rule of law such as freedom of thought, religion and personal conviction. A secular State should not divide citizens into a large majority and small minorities as all enjoy the same rights and privileges.

Liberalism recognizes two spheres, the sphere of faith/belief and of the rational/intellectual. These are individual matters and are autonomous. Faith/belief should be left to the authority of the individual. Issues of the State and of society belong in the public sphere. Contemporary issues that liberal religionists have been thinking through include democracy, human rights, gender justice, the parity of religions, and contact between religions. These conversations do not need to follow traditional patterns and are not confined to unalterable texts. Both the Bible and the Qu’ran instruct believers to use their intellect: liberal Islâm gives parity to faith (iman/fides) and the intellect (akal/ratio). This is in line with mainstream Catholic thinking.

**Pluralism:**

A third key reality embraced positively in secular societies is pluralism. The simple reality of cultural and religious pluralism becomes a necessary political principle. Threats to a nation’s integrity need to be met by tolerance, openness and equality. Dialogue can open the way to greater mutual understanding, tolerance and civility. In a plural society and in a secular State, the State has no right to declare one religion as correct and the others as false. In a secular State, all religions must be held to be true according to their followers. This ethical principle is the foundation of social justice, equality of rights and harmony between followers of different religions.

Looking at the major role religion is playing in public life in most countries, the concept secularism as the marginalisation of religion from public life needs correcting. Which aspects of religion are being privatised and which aspects need to play, and indeed are playing a role in public life? Aspects such as ritual, worship and belief belong to the private sphere. The State and public institutions have no right to interfere in the subjective sphere, with one’s personal relationship with God.

This conviction leads to a willingness to learn from each other. Pluralism acknowledges difference and invites dialogue. Without
pluralism, society will be dominated by a hegemonic majority – by Catholic Christianity in the Philippines, Protestant Christianity in areas of Papua, Hinduism in India, and Islâm in much of Indonesia.

The liberalization of our thought is a consequence of the process of a modern, plural society which is becoming increasingly complex which in turn encourages open communication between its diverse members. The result is nothing less than tolerance and harmony between followers of diverse religions. As cross-cultural missioners, this is the secular world that we embrace.

As progressive cross-cultural missioners we see our religious conviction today as an integral element within the global plurality of cultures. Western culture, historically Judeo-Christian, has been attempting to hold onto a dominating cultural, economic and political hegemony. Precisely this global hegemony from the West is causing resistance to pluralism within religious communities elsewhere.

The problem is how to nurture a plural identity without turning to “identity politics” which is pregnant with potential conflict. There are at least two concepts of “identity politics” alive today. Firstly, identity politics which wants to achieve and maintain the hegemony of the majority. And secondly, an “identity politics” launched by minorities to preserve and nurture the identity of their group over against the majority. Within a plural society, both of these concepts give birth to tension and conflict.

We do not need “identity politics” in a plural secular society which acknowledges the identity of each group. Indeed, in multicultural politics the government is tasked to assist and protect minority groups. With pluralism, a plural society becomes creative. The heart of pluralism is mutual understanding, as it is also at the heart of authentic dialogue.

Anyone who withdraws into an encapsulating ideology, religious or ethnic, and rejects secularism and its progress is rightly labelled a fanatic and extremist.

**The Secular and the Scriptural:**

The Catholic Church was slow to acknowledge the values of the secular. And yet, since the time of John XXIII (*Mater et magistra* [1961], *Pacem in terris* [1963]) and the final documents from his Ecumenical Council (*Nostra aetate, Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et spes* [1965]), we have found it increasingly
straightforward to dovetail the foundation of our social teaching - human dignity - with the secular world’s upholding of human rights. This is where mission witness lies in dialogue with “empathetic secularism”. We are invited to (re-)read the Scriptures through the prism of positive secular values, while simultaneously (re-)reading secular society through the prism of biblical values. Hopefully we are doing this regularly in Bible sharing with the last and the least in society.

And yet, the globalising capitalist market is reeking havoc with any possible rational, progressive, secular society.

**The Usurpation of the Secular**

Positive as certain key secular values are, the present hegemonic model of global culture and commerce flies in the face of crucial religious values. And so, while dialoguing with the empathetic secular, we are called to be present and give Gospel witness by forming counter-cultural networks. Rational science, empirical knowledge, democratic politics, liberalized trade, human rights, gender equality, and an emphasis on the individual, all these secular positives are being bastardised by the crass values of the global market. The values of mammon and of the Gospel lie in stark contrast. Here I limit my comments to the situation in Southeast Asia as I see it, trusting the reader will compare, contrast and question what I say from the particular contexts in which you are embedded. Context is not just context; it is our *locus theologicus*.

**Cyber-World:**
In Indonesia Facebook is the most frequently used website (49 million Indonesian users in 2013), satellite disks bring CNN and other commercial value systems into once remote villages, while 95% of Indonesians own hand-phones. This has led to major shifts in value systems, mind-sets and worldviews. The Word of the preacher, the parent or the teacher, is just one among a chorus of voices and possibilities. Our credibility comes not from professional status or social hierarchy, but from sincere and empathetic relationships, and this where the cyber-world

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2 The CIA claims there are 236.8 million hand-phone users in Indonesia in a population of c. 240 million. For Facebook country statistics see [www.quintly.com](http://www.quintly.com). For an analysis of the impact of cyber-communications on the indigenous cultures of eastern Indonesia, see Prior, “Religion and Social Communication: Relations and Challenges”, *Religion and Social Communication*, 7/1-2 (2009), 113-132.

continues to bring about kaleidoscopic changes in our very experience of community. Over the past decades the very meaning of communication has changed from “technical means” to “social networks”. The choice is either to withdraw into religion as a ritual and identity marker, or to engage in a “prophetic dialogue” through active presence and convincing witness. What do our myriad social relationships say about the values to which we are committed?

**Consumerisation:**
Market values such as competition, social standing and consumerism have made inroads dislodging positive secular values. Neo-liberal capitalism believes that millions of selfish, price-driven decisions, when left to market forces, will create the greatest social good. In such an economy, driven by a lust for raw power and an insatiable greed for wealth, there is little room for authentic religious humanism, for conscience and compassion, for dignity and equity, for solidarity and cooperation, nor for integrity and sustainability. People are central not markets, human dignity is at the heart not material gain. Placing the person back at the centre is the most radical counter-cultural stance we can make. Does this describe our chosen personal and community lifestyle?

**Systemic Corruption:**
Central and local governments are systemically corrupt and rife with political cartels from the money-politics of the USA to the fascism of China. Of 50 Indonesian cities surveyed by Corruption Watch, the most corrupt was found to be Kupang, the capital of the majority-Christian Province of East Nusa Tenggara. The province as a whole (the islands of Timor, Flores, Sumba) is the second poorest and the fourth most corrupt in Indonesia. The corruptors are regular Mosque and church attendees; pious and corrupt can form a single template. In a world of crass corruption, our witness is in simplicity, authenticity and transparency, or it is worthless. If we are not untying the webs of corruption on which we as individuals depend, and in which our communities and institutions are enmeshed, then our witness is counter-productive.

**Uprooted:**
Some 80% of the world’s indigenous peoples live in Asia, yet hundreds of millions of Asians are economic migrants or people displaced by conflict, dislodged from their cultural and linguistic roots - exculturated. Human trafficking forms the

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underbelly of the global economy, and increasingly male migrants, away from wife and children, are returning home with the HIV virus. Many urban migrants join Pentecostal communities in their search for identity, stability, community and the grace to succeed in life. Here our presence is particularly needed. If we are not truly present with the economically, culturally and religiously uprooted with its slave underbelly, then our mission is nowhere.

**Exclusionist:**
There is a more exclusivist ethno-religious sub-culture arising among those threatened by rapid change, a tendency present among all religious communities, although change is not occurring at the same rate everywhere, nor in each place within any one district. Those displaced and discarded might well become defensive, encapsulating themselves in a more rigid, fundamentalist, even fanatical form of religion where “the outsider” is a threat, or at least the scapegoat for being pushed to the margin. Are we becoming more threatened and restrictive, or more open and vulnerable?

**Identity Marker:**
Those battered, and thus threatened by rapid social change, the vulnerable poor and the marginalised who feel unable to build up solidarity across religious and cultural boundaries, tend to pull up the drawbridge and batten down the hatches, where religion is reduced to internal ritual and community identity, and when provoked can tend towards violence. A practical agnostic sub-culture is growing among the elite while exclusivist ethno-religious sub-cultures are present among the vulnerable. Do we define our identity as “over against” or “together with” the other?

**Inarticulate:**
We have a majority who are finding increasing difficulty in expressing themselves. They are losing the religious-symbolic language in which to express their deepest hopes and joys and aspirations, unable to transcend the present or speak of more

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than the here and now in their own language. This results in a sense of cultural inferiority that has led some to cling to ethnic identity in an extreme form. Engulfed by the tsunami of global commercial values, the uprooted and displaced can be drawn into cultural fundamentalism. Our vocation is not necessarily to be a voice for the voiceless, but we are often called to accompany the inarticulate until they rediscover the language of love and mercy, to become transcendentally human again.

Impact on Culture and Religion

Having looked at both the positive and the negative aspects of our globalising secular world, we are able to make the following observations.

**Cultural Ambivalence:**

The modernisation process - originally brought to former colonies by the Churches with their schools, clinics and training centres - is highly ambivalent. Modernisation has brought about an openness to the wider world, but precisely that openness is marginalising the fragile cosmic cultures. Modernisation has brought about unprecedented material wealth for some, but is creating a poverty unknown in the past; it has replaced a cyclical, relaxed, natural sense of time with a lineal, historical model which grasps at the future, where the fittest survive and the weak are marginalised. Modernisation has given meaning to the individual over the group, and in so doing is fragmenting the symbolic world of the group so that the individual is becoming inarticulate: the individual is losing the language in which to express self-worth. In this situation of creeping social anomie, threatened groups tend to become authoritarian. Are we witnessing to Christ the compassionate liberator rather than the harsh judge?

**Religious Manipulation:**

There is a shift in the role and use of religion. Formerly, religious symbolism was communal - it belonged to everybody, while its articulation in ritual language was known to a few ritual specialists. Regular ceremonies were held during which the ritual specialists recited the myths and history that bound the people together as a unit. Today, both the traditional rituals and their clan articulators are disappearing. Religion is becoming more hierarchical and separate from the people's local culture. Official language is caught up in the language of the wealthy political elite who often use religious symbolism to justify the status quo. Modern culture produces a suspicious
secularism that we can portray as a powerful minority usurping the religious world of the marginalised majority for their own material ends. Religious language that formerly breathed the Life of the Spirit into everybody and everything, is now being displaced by the ideological language of coercion, definitive, irrefutable ‘truths’, in the hands of an avaricious elite. In the cosmic world, the economic and political order worked for the benefit of all. Now the political order is in the hands of transnational conglomerates and their local cronies and works for their minority interests. Are they our sponsors too?

Where does that leave the forces of moderation?

A Paradigm for Cross-Cultural Missioners

In the face of any fanatical rejection of secularism, we can observe, and hopefully participate in, an ongoing positive encounter with the secular world, but always and in every case alongside the victims and survivors of global capitalism. Partnership between secularism, liberalism, pluralism, and more recently feminism, is gradually shaping a reforming paradigm in which we can, and should, be engaged, a paradigm perceived through the eyes of the poor and discarded of society.\(^8\)

We have already seen how Secularism opens the way to social justice, equality and harmony in multi-cultural and multi-religious communities. Secularism also provides the necessary freedom to religious bodies to grow fruitfully without distorting interventions from the State. Liberalism, that is, the liberalisation of thought, frees the mind from encapsulating dogma, rigid orthodoxy and fear of change. A liberal attitude is a precondition for the practice of pluralism, the historical root on which secularism has been grafted. In appreciating pluralism we recognize the value of a liberalising process in our thinking and the practice of secularism in politics. It should be added, however, that it is not always easy to ascertain which political movements are putting on religious masks and which religious movements are assuming political forms. And the fourth reforming factor we saw is feminism which is profoundly influencing both ethnically-derived and faith-based organisations and networks. Domestic violence is being

\(^8\) Secularism, Liberalism and pluralism shape the platform of liberal Islám. For the Indonesian movement see, Budhy Munawar-Rachman, Sekularisme, Liberalisme, dan Pluralisme: Islam Progresif dan Perkembangan Diskursusnya (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010).
exposed, gender-biased readings of the Qu’rân and the Bible are being laid bare, women are gradually breaking through previous male monopolies in business, politics and many religious bodies. Scholars from each of the world religions continue to publish feminist studies.

Accordingly, secularism, liberalism, pluralism and feminism constitute a reforming paradigm for progressive members of majority religions and for religious minorities; it forms a foundation for religious freedom and for the role of religion in the public domain. These four facets of the reforming paradigm guarantee the autonomy of civil society and the implementation of religious life which is both tolerant and dynamic. But with whose eyes are we observing, with whose ears are we listening, in whose interests are we working?

On the Ambivalent Role of Religion

Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist majority countries continue to wrestle with the issue of how far the majority religion should be allowed to permeate a liberal, secular State. Christian minorities, which, since political independence in many a land have lost their pre-eminence in education, health services and social outreach, have had to learn that a tolerant, pluralistic society is feasible not only without relying on these traditional social institutions, but is better assured when the churches are more clearly visible as a moral force in the public sphere without any institutional stake in power.

Ambiguous Role:

Religious belief and commitment, both in the struggle for independence during colonial times and today when we are buffeted by a tsunami of global, commercialised values, presents itself as a moral force for public and personal ethics, but also as a sectarian force that triggers communal violence. Apparently

9 TRUK-F, a human rights NGO in Maumere, Indonesia, led by Sr. Eustochia Nata, SSpsS, is part of a nationwide ecumenical and inter-faith network accompanying survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking.


religion is ‘bi-polar’. While religion has been playing a
decisive part in ‘structural violence’, that is, in the
legislating of discriminatory laws, religion has also been a
force for peace and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{12} Not a few countries seem to
hover at the crossroads between sectarian disintegration,
authoritarian crony capitalism, and the long, winding haul to a
multi-cultural, multi-religious, secular State.

A “majority-minority dynamic” seems to determine how religions
might enter the public domain. For the religious majority,
religion usually legitimises their dominant, hegemonic status,
that is, the status quo. Local majorities tend to adhere to the
“doctrine of conformity”. In Indonesia, for instance, there is a
de facto Catholic hegemony in Flores, a Protestant domination of
areas in Batakland, and Muslim control of Banjarmasin.

Despite a brief discussion of “the death of God” in the mid-
1960s, religion has proved to be persistent and resilient in the
public sphere. Historically, religious adherence assured
solidarity among its believers who played a key role in the
struggle for independence in Asian and African countries. Later,
and into contemporary times, such religious solidarity
articulated a voice for the voiceless and enunciated a moral
force for social justice. The crass injustice of globalisation
today has provoked people to see their faith as an avenue for
criticising, resisting and challenging those who control State
and economic power.

But then we come across the sectarian face of religion, which is
delaying the evolution of an empathetic secular State,
destroying civility and the very ethical basis of civilisation.
With its mono-linguistic, fundamentalist moral demands in the
public domain, religious sectarianism is destroying communal
peace and harmony. Seemingly not a few countries are forever at
the crossroads between sectarian disintegration and the long,
winding haul to a multi-cultural, multi-religious, secular
State. Seemingly, some countries, such as Indonesia, are still
wrestling with the issue of how far the majority religion should
be allowed to “infiltrate” a liberal, secular State.

\textbf{Ethical Values:}

If we are to be a witnessing presence in such a world, then the
moral and ethical values of religious discourse need to be
translated into universal values in a common tongue. This is

\textsuperscript{12} Each inter-communal conflict has eventually been brought to an end by
credible members of the faith traditions involved.
crucial. In true dialogue there is a drive to self-renewal, increased openness leading to mutual enrichment and transformation. And this non-structural power of open communication is a democratic mechanism of control through achieving a renewed consensus - as long as ‘universal values’ is not code for Western, male, or any other global hegemony, but rather lasting transcendental values at the core of what it is to be human. And so proclamation in dialogue shuns religious truth as “euphoric infallibility” denying any place to definitive, irrefutable dogmatic absolutism. Rather, it has an audacious capacity for enjoying every sign of beauty, every spark of truth, stretching far beyond boundaries of creedal allegiance and inherited piety, embracing truth as “inclusive-pluralistic”.

The clash, then, is not so much between faith and the secular, but rather between religious truth as “euphoric infallibility” and religious truth as “inclusive-pluralistic”. For in many Asian and African countries secularism does not entail the removal of religious ethics from the public sphere, let alone its total marginalisation or privatisation. Secularism does, however, deny any place to dogmatic absolutism. Concomitant with this, there is the ongoing tension between a western, colonial Christianity and local and national cultures.

Clearly majorities everywhere today prefer harmony over confrontation. However, more is needed than traditional tolerance, mutual respect and a formal acceptance of others. As rapid change uproots and unsettles, so inter-faith networks need to work assiduously towards a deeper mutual understanding and acknowledgement, what voices in the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) have termed “mutual conversion”.

Putting the Last First

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13 Over fifty years ago Yves Congar wrote that the “external authority of pastors, the authority of all external rules – rites, dogmatic formulations, organisations, canonical discipline, etc. – is not self-justifying. It can never promote itself in practices as an end or as a value independent of the finalities it is to serve, the finalities of the personal relationship of faith and of love within a Church entirely made up of persons... The New Law, [wrote Thomas Aquinas] consists principally in the grace of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.” “Diversité et divisions”, Catholicisme un et divers. (Paris: Fayard, 1962), 27-43. Congar’s context was inter-Church, today’s is inter-cultural and inter-faith.

What is still missing in the mainstreaming of secularism, liberalism, pluralism and feminism is the belief and value embedded in both Islâm and Christianity, namely love of neighbour. Faith-inspired political and economic strategies in an empathetic secular pluralistic State will surely only succeed in a society where everyone is important and distinct, but also willingly interdependent on others. Then faith would embrace secularism as a vital partner in the human enterprise.

But in a polarised world “love of neighbour” needs to be understood and lived by Christians as laid down clearly in the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures. We are called to be neighbour to those lost or battered, robbed and left to die by the roadside (Lk 15). It is when we re-engage with the paradigm of secularism, liberalism, pluralism and feminism from the side of the uprooted, the displaced, the trafficked, the lost and the least of society, that our presence and witness is informed with a Gospel dynamic. It is when our economics and politics are engaged from the side of the last and the least, when “progress” is judged from the position of those left out, that the positive secular values of the enlightenment can dovetail with Gospel mission.

Thus crucially love of neighbour invites us to evaluate society and our place in it, not through economic grafts and statistics but rather from the perspective of the poor, of the losers, of the marginalised, of the least and the lost. We measure progress in every area through the impact of policies, whether intended or not, on the poor. The poor are at the centre, the last are our first priority. And those discarded by the present global world order constitute no less than 40% of humanity.

This can happen only when we are genuinely attentive and truly present to people in their total environment; listening to, and learning from, all the voices. Authentic witness is a matter of being truly present, in the first place to the poor. Centred on Christ and his Word, it is challenging but, as we know, deeply rewarding.