



## You gotta have faith! 3. The Public Sphere, Ideas and Faith

Steve Wilcox

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#### 3. A look at the public sphere, ideas and faith

Christians are often accused of using 'faith', as opposed to 'reason'. In reality, all people use both faith and reason. This has major consequences for intellectual debate and public policy issues. For it means that there is no such thing as 'objectivity'. Everyone brings their faith to the discussion table.

Lilian Ladele is dismissed from her role as a registrar because of Christian conscience. A council worker is sacked for suggesting that a terminally ill patient should look to God for help. We are all aware of examples of Christians being sidelined in public life.[1]

#### More at stake

There is more at stake here than a bit of persecution. The freedom to proclaim the gospel is being removed in some areas of society — most notably those controlled by the state. Millions of children are growing up in complete ignorance of the gospel — or worse, to fear Christianity. Christian children in our schools are often made to feel ridiculous. *"But persecution leads to gospel advance"* someone might say. But if we turn to history, the argument doesn't necessarily ring true. You may point me to the Marian persecution of Reformers in the UK in the 1550s — to the candle which was lit by Latimer and Ridley. But I'll point you to the 16th century persecution in France which virtually extinguished the gospel in that country.

So, there is persecution and there is blunting of gospel opportunities. But the malaise in public debate cuts even deeper than that. In the name of 'objectivity', Christian beliefs are being ruled out of court altogether. As one peer said during the debate over the Sexual Orientation Regulations: *"People have the right to believe that homosexual practise is somehow wrong, but they do not have the right to put their beliefs into action."*

Furthermore, television and media promote the idea that Christianity is untrue, irrelevant, even dangerous. The intellectual debate has been lost, it seems, even before it has been fought. Which makes personal evangelism 100 times harder. As Rico Tice has observed, the obstacles to people coming to faith have multiplied in recent years. Even children of Christians may think that Christianity is only relevant to a fraction of their lives — so not worth bothering about at all. And all in the name of 'objectivity'.

#### The myth of 'objectivity'

But what is 'objectivity'? It's the idea that the assertions of faith and 'values' should be kept out of politics, public life and the intellectual realm of ideas. This is because faith and values are a matter of 'private belief'. Public debate should take place on 'neutral ground', because it is concerned with matters of fact and reason — matters of objectivity.

This conception of reality is utterly false. As we saw in the first article, everyone has faith. Everyone has a bottom line of 'faith commitments' — ideas and beliefs which are, for them, non-negotiable. This is just as true for the atheist as it is for the Christian. It is just as true for the university academics as it is for the Christian students they sometimes torment. We then saw in the second article that there is no such thing as a bare fact. 'Facts' are always grounded in a faith system. People *"should always state the opinions on which their facts are based"*. Therefore, there is no such thing as 'neutral ground' or 'objectivity'. We also saw that many of the good things we take for granted in our society come from a foundation of Christian faith.

#### Politicians have faith

So you can't keep faith out of politics. Every

politician has faith. Nor can you keep faith out of intellectual debate. Every academic has faith. And Christians have just as much right to have their faith heard as anyone else. More so, in fact, since their faith has proved to have such beneficial consequences over centuries. As an aside, I personally find the phrase *"those of all faiths and none"* profoundly unhelpful. It reinforces the idea that some people operate by faith whereas others do not. Everyone has faith!

But there is one particular 'false faith' which is currently destroying British society, even as it parasites itself on the Christian foundations of British society. It is a false faith known as secular humanism.

## The faith of secular humanism

Secular humanism has exerted a profound influence on British society in recent years. It is not that individual secular humanists make up the majority in our society. Rather, the beliefs of secular humanism have become a dominant element in the cultural air that we breathe. For example, consider the public / private distinction discussed above. This distinction may have arisen historically for a variety of reasons, but it has been used with great effect to keep God out of public debate. In fact, it has been used to brainwash us all into thinking that secular humanist faith is the only permissible faith in the public sphere!

What, then, does secular humanist faith hold as its chief principles? As an example, the Declaration of the Council for Secular Humanism[2] contains ten key principles or faith commitments.[3] At face value, the principles seem reasonable. But, on closer examination, it is clear that all ten principles are governed by a naturalistic view of the world. This is set out in principle 6, 'Religious Skepticism'. Any claim to supernatural reality is rejected (including, explicitly, the divinity of Jesus).

## Implications for society

Once the Creative and Lordship claims of Christ are so easily dismissed, the implications for society are obvious. For example, if there is no God, then of course children should not be taught about him (principle 5); whereas, if there is, there

is nothing more important for them to learn. And, if there is no God, all we are left with for the formation of knowledge — including ethical knowledge — is the scientific method of inquiry (principles 1 and 4). This will not get us very far — which is convenient for those who want to impose their own morality of 'anything goes'. The Declaration also fails to admit that the majority of its ideals (for example freedom, progress, reason, morality) arose largely in the Christian world, as we noted in the previous article.

For the secular humanist, then, God is defined out of the public sphere from the start. Does that sound familiar?

## Where do we go from here?

One of the great debates among Bible-believing Christians over the centuries has concerned the extent to which Christians should be involved in politics. On the one hand, Luther famously stated that he would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian. The 'two kingdoms' model derived from Luther's thought implied that Christians should stay away from political power at all costs. The Reformed, on the other hand, have typically emphasised the Lordship of Christ over every sphere of society — citing Psalm 2, for example.

## Undercutting the debate

I would suggest (somewhat boldly perhaps) that the above analysis undercuts this debate. All would agree that Christians are to be 'salt and light' in society (Matthew 5.13-16). All would agree that we are to *"take every thought captive"* for Christ (2 Corinthians 10.5). In these three articles we have been discussing ideas (beliefs), not the grasping of political power. If there is no such thing as 'objectivity', then at root there are two sets of ideas in the world: on the one hand, there are biblical ideas which bring eternal life and which renew individuals and society in the meantime. On the other hand, there are unbiblical ideas which bring eternal condemnation and destroy individuals and society in the meantime. Surely we must pray and act to advance the former set of ideas, wherever they lead? To put it another way, if there is a God, then of course he has something to say to matters of public life! Surely we don't believe that, for example, abortion is any

less abominable to God in 21st-century Britain than it was to him in Old Testament Israel?

## Discipleship in roles

Furthermore, all would agree that we are to “*make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28.19). But if there is no public-private divide — if discipleship incorporates every aspect of our lives — then we must teach people what discipleship looks like in their particular role in society. Christian politicians must be taught how to rule Christianly; Christian broadcasters must be taught how to broadcast Christianly, and so on. In his *Christian Directory*, the Puritan Richard Baxter took 250,000 words to describe the implications of the gospel for every Christian as we engage in society.[4] We must learn from his example.

## Evangelism

Finally, our greatest priority must, of course, be evangelism — real change will only happen as people become Christians. We will consider evangelism in more detail in the final article. But I hope we can see that to evangelise the nation we need to expose the false faiths contained within non-biblical ideas. We need to show that the secular emperor has no clothes — and that Christianity is a far more ‘reasonable’ faith than the alternatives. We need to show that the burden of proof is not on Christianity to prove itself true, but on other ‘faiths’ to prove that they have something to offer. If we cannot show this, then why would anyone bother listening to us about eternal matters, let alone temporal ones?

[Go to Part 4: Evangelism and Faith]

## Footnotes

[1] The recent Christian Institute report ‘Marginalising Christians’ is informative and chilling reading.

[2] [www.secularhumanism.org](http://www.secularhumanism.org). Accessed on March 29 2010.

[3] Free enquiry; separation of church and state; the ideal of freedom; ethics based on ‘critical intelligence’; moral education; religious skepticism; reason; science and technology; evolution; education.

[4] Part III — Christian Politics.

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