

CATHOLIC UNION CHARITABLE TRUST LECTURE: 1 MARCH 2018

Cakes, Conscience and Freedom - Roger Trigg

- 1) Should religious beliefs play any part in the public square, both in the formation of policy, but also as the object of policy? Is religion a private matter, irrelevant to our life together? Yet faith is not subjective – it should be rationally defended or challenged. Also, religious belief is indissolubly linked with public practice. Christianity holds definite conceptions of what is good for people, what constitutes human flourishing, why humans have an inherent dignity, why freedom matters etc. Freedom of religion cannot just be freedom of worship.
- 2) There are now battles between equality and freedom, national law and private conscience, and secular versus religious standards. An example is given by two cases about cakes (Colorado – *Masterpiece*, and Belfast – *Ashers Bakery*) at the moment before the U.S. and U.K. Supreme Courts respectively. In both cases because of a religious conscience, businesses refused to make cakes for gay couples (in Colorado for a wedding, and in Belfast as part of a political campaign.) Was this to be outlawed as discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation? Is equality to trump freedom? Does religious belief matter? The Belfast cake was to read ‘Support Gay Marriage’ – is coercion to write this, or go out of business, a challenge to freedom of speech, as well as to freedom for a religious conscience?
- 3) If national policy is to determine the role of a private conscience, with the authority of the State paramount, we are on the road to totalitarianism. None of us is omniscient and democracy depends on each individual’s judgments about what is right and wrong, good and bad. In a free society, we should respect – and listen to- views with which we do not agree.
- 4) If the cakes issue seems trivial, in Canada, ‘physician-assisted dying’ (assisted suicide and euthanasia) is now legal, and similar issues are arising. The conscience of many doctors holds them back, and they could even be driven out of the profession. Many are reluctant even to refer patients on, because they see themselves as then complicit in murder (cf. two bank robbers – one shooting, after the other shouts ‘shoot him, I can’t’). As with abortion, people should not be coerced, on pain of loss of career, to participate in what they believe to be wrong. It is not whether we agree, but whether we allow a freedom to act from conscience, even if we do not agree. The freedom only to go with the crowd is not freedom.
- 5) Truth is at stake, and in a pluralist society there is profound disagreement about its nature. Mere social conformity is not a good basis for moral insight. We are left with the ‘dictatorship of relativism’. Religion does not have a monopoly on moral beliefs, but it does deal with what believers think most important. Ignoring that undermines people’s responsibility for their decisions and actions, and their dignity as a moral agent. Authoritarian states do not like alternative authorities, particularly God. (cf. Communist China). Freedom is indivisible. Limitations on practising faith in accordance with conscience will be coupled with limitations on political and economic freedoms. ‘Liberalism’ betrays itself by pursuing equality at the expense of freedom. Reasonable accommodation of conscience is essential. If public policy bears down on the public manifestations of religion, democracy is in danger.

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