

Catholicism in the Secular World

25th February, 2016

Thank you for the kind words of introduction and the invitation to address the Catholic Union this evening on the important topic of Catholicism in the Secular World. It is apt that we are speaking to this topic in Westminster and at this time, for the purpose of the Catholic Union of Great Britain is to champion the spiritual, moral and social teaching of the Catholic Church in the public sphere. Your declared task is to influence the changing nature of the parliamentary world and government. You also undertake to uphold a Christian standpoint in public life through educational activities, representations to Parliament, government and the media.

So this evening it is important that we look at how Catholicism plays its part in this world and how both Catholicism has changed, and how our world has changed since 1870 when the Catholic Union first came into existence. Today's tasks might be somewhat different from those faced in 1870, but it desire to ensure that the Catholic community is able to make a full and rich contribution to the life of the Church and wider society is the same.

This evening I would like to do two principal things in this speech. To say something about the secular world and then to explore how Catholicism can make a contribution to that world. But to make a contribution requires two things: the world must allow for the freedom to

engage and the Church must engage. For that to happen our world needs to be a pluralist space open to voices beyond the state which enrich society and including faiths.

So what of the world in which we live? What is our wider cultural context? Is it secular?

Our domestic contemporary society, and indeed many parts of the world, but especially the Western world, is today searching for a way to deal with ever more complex worlds of difference. This is particularly the case when it comes to religions as societies struggle to deal with the question of what role religion plays or should play in our respective societies. That is compounded by a growing diversity of religions and sometimes even questions about what constitutes a recognised religion and how to deal in a fair and equitable way with all religions, beliefs and none. This is taking place at a time when our overall religious literacy seems to be at an all time low.

When the Prime Minister issued his Christmas greetings last December he sparked a lively debate about whether the country was still a Christian one. People seemed to struggle with how to determine or measure if the country was still Christian. And 18 months ago we also recall the investigations into attempts to influence the ethos of state schools in some parts of Birmingham and the subsequent guidance coming from Ofsted about how to handle radicalisation in schools. And in the midst of all this there is also a broader debate about the role of faith schools in society and their overall contribution. All relevant to the work of the Catholic Union.

And in our contemporary culture there is an increasingly loud voice which would suggest that the only way to deal with the growing religious complexity is through creating a more privatized form of religion. To push it out of the public sphere and into the private. This ideology would have society believe that competing absolutist claims by faiths should be rejected, but with one exception perhaps and that is the absolutist claims made by militant secularism itself that it is somehow neutral and objective and should therefore be the norm.

Such an offer of a 'level playing field' one that claims to be neutral and fair and objective, could in these days seduce policy makers and politicians as they try to navigate the complexity of our culture and society. Professor Tariq Modood at the University of Bristol offers a cautionary note when he says that 'if by neutral is meant that a state should have no cultural or religious character then that is an impossible condition to fulfill. There is no such thing as a culturally contentless state or public space. The state will always have some historical cultural character. Every state will draw on a specific set of ethical, political and legal traditions, and while they will have some element of universality, they will always have some particularity too.'

But despite this warning policy makers are seduced by the offer of neutrality and absolute objectivity. They can be attracted because they could think that they are grappling with unprecedented issues. Most likely they are not.

As the Catholic Union knows only too well from its own history similar tensions gripped earlier generations too as they faced the hurdle of

building cohesive societies amidst a growing diversity that might have stretched the imagination of those who went before us, to think of a wider cultural canvas than had hitherto been the case within very homogenous societies. So from time to time we should remind ourselves that such challenges to stretch the imagination to incorporate new groups into society is not new, nor a stretch. The history of post-Reformation Catholicism in the United Kingdom, and its long re-integration and acceptance which was until a recently a work in progress, is an illustration of that point.

Regulatory authorities too need to recall the difficulties faced by earlier generations in building community and integrating diversity into a cohesive society. For regulatory authorities it might seem easier – when faced with competing interests - to roll back faith from the public sphere and impose a one size fits all approach arguing that it is ‘neutral’, fair, value for money, etc. But that would raise another set of problems; ‘neutral’ from what and fair to whom? In such a new era whose values would prevail? For Professor Modood ‘any political norm that tries to exclude religious identities from the public square is incompatible with multicultural citizenship. If religious identity faces exclusion but not identities based on ethnicity, race, gender and so on then there is a bias against religious identity and a failure to practice equality between identities or identity groups.’

There is also the related risk that faith communities themselves retreat from navigating the complexity or promoting the distinctiveness of their offer so that they just blend in. And Pope Francis has cautioned against just blending in, speaking in Rome in May 2014 to a group of Italian schoolteachers and students, he said, “Education cannot be

neutral. It is either positive or negative; either it enriches or it impoverishes; either it enables a person to grow or it lessens, even corrupts him. The mission of schools is to develop a sense of truth, of what is good and beautiful.”¹ In other words, simply blending in erodes the distinctiveness and the very *raison d’être* for existence as a separate offering. Both approaches – blending in or rolling back faith - would be wrong, as they would greatly diminish a culturally rich and diverse society.

So to situate the potential of Catholicism to engage our culture we must first determine what the culture is and what underpins it? More specifically we need to determine what type of polity do we live in or want and how does it relate to faith? Is our culture a secular one which only sees a ‘private’ role for faith in the wider society? Is it something which is confined to Sunday morning? Is it an individual freedom to worship, but without a collective dimension which is allowed to manifest itself in society? Will it be a world in which the state emerges with a monopoly on service provision in education, etc and at the expense of society? Will it be a world where faith providers can perhaps deliver a service, but will not be able to call on official funds to do so? Or is our world one which will be comfortable with a multiple number of service providers, with the state regulating the space to sustain acceptable standards in service delivery and content? In such a world, regulator and service provider must find ways to cooperate, respecting the proper role/remit of the other.

¹ Pope Francis, 10 May 2014,
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140510_mondo-della-scuola.html

To date the latter model most resembles our society in the UK, but there is no guarantee that such a model will always prevail and bodies like the Catholic Union must be alive to that risk. Choices and priorities will always be looked at afresh and sometimes what can appear as a rather dry technical matter can have far reaching consequences for society; the role of the individual in that society; the ability of organisations to engage and participate; and the very nature of state authority and control itself. One just has to recall the precedent set by the rulings on the Catholic adoption agencies in the face of revised legislation which put them in an impossible position vis a vis the law of the land and the ethos of the institution. So what guides choices in the contemporary period?

There are competing views about the future of our society. Much of it revolves around the place of faith in the society. For example, that can often be about the role of faith schools in the society. Why it is asked do tax payers fund faith-based schools? Why are schools separated along faith lines and how is that compatible with building one society? These questions are likely to come to a head in the coming weeks when Louise Casey produces her report for the Prime Minister on how to tackle inclusion and citizenship. What will she have to say about Catholic schools and their contribution? Will they be presented as a positive or as a negative?

The Catholic community will have to think carefully about how it responds to that report. Too often as Catholics we can wade into the practical responses without first re-examining the theoretical underpinnings of our own tradition. The all-important historical context or philosophical approach is often marginal to what at times can be quite

a polemical debate and no one should fall into that trap and divorce themselves from their own intellectual traditions. Eventually that leaves us grappling around in the dark. That can also be the perspective adopted by the state, a simple knee-jerk reaction which fails to appreciate the UK's own traditions and history.

At its heart Catholicism must see its task in the world as trying to find a reconciling of what some might describe as that two centuries old rupture between faith and reason ushered in at the time of the Enlightenment and developed in the centuries since. Healing such a rupture must see faith and reason as allies, not enemies and the Enlightenment not alien, but as something which grew out of faith. For much of the past two centuries we have thought of the enlightenment as ushering in this rupture between faith and reason. Professor Charles Taylor wrote in 'The Secular Age', that, 'Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions. It should not be depicted as a rupture, but as an evolving story of human history with the secular and the religious dimensions not juxtaposed, but emerging from the same story.'²

On this question one of the prophetic voices is Pope Emeritus Benedict. Benedict has been writing for much of his life about the risks we face when we separate ourselves from all ethical traditions to rely exclusively on technological reasoning and its possibilities.³ He writes, 'this rationality can become devastating if it becomes detached from its roots and exalts technological feasibility as the sole criterion. The bond

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press 2007

³ Josef Ratzinger, 'Europe Today and Tomorrow', Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, p 42

between the two great sources of knowledge – nature and history – is necessary.’⁴

At a time when we are trying to work out how to deal with those who use religion as a vehicle for their own violent agendas, there is perhaps never a better time to repeat Joseph Ratzinger’s call for reason to be policing faith, and faith policing reason. It is not an ‘either or’ situation. Ratzinger recognizes that there are pathologies of religion, and there are pathologies of reason.⁵ He wrote, ‘faith in God, the idea of God, can be manipulated, and then it becomes destructive; this is the risk that religion runs. But reason that cuts itself off from God completely and tries to confine him to the purely subjective realm loses its bearings and thus opens the door to the forces of destruction. He says, ‘Whereas the Enlightenment was searching for moral foundations that would be valid – even if God did not exist – we must invite our agnostic friends today to be open to a morality – as if God did exist.’⁶ The risk is that by continuing with a rupture and in the absence of any intellectual reconciliation, our culture will remain adrift from its roots and history. Benedict has said, ‘There can be no peace in the world without genuine peace between reason and faith, because without peace between reason and religion, the sources of morality and law dry up.’⁷

There are others too who are highlighting the risk of a continued rupture in the relationship between faith and reason. Alasdair Macintyre characterizes this as Thomistic ideals coming up against Rousseauist ideals and this lack of a common language or ability to reach consensus

⁴ *ibid*, p 43

⁵ Josef Ratzinger, ‘Europe Today and Tomorrow’, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, p 93

⁶ *ibid*, p 96

⁷ *ibid*, p 93

could lead to a Nietzschean amorality of total chaotic relativism.⁸ Jurgen Habermas and doyen of the Frankfurt School echoed that point when he said, “it remains the case that liberal societal structures are dependent on the solidarity of their citizens. And if the secularisation of society goes off the rails, the sources of this solidarity may dry up altogether. That could well slacken the democratic bond and exhaust the kind of solidarity that the democratic state needs, but cannot impose by law. This would lead to the transformation of the citizens of prosperous and peaceful liberal societies into isolated nomads acting on the basis of their own self interest, persons who used their subjective rights only as weapons against each other.”⁹

But how to avoid a drying up of solidarity which serves to provide the glue of consensus and the basics which allow our societies to exist and function. Again Joseph Ratzinger provides a framework, and one which partly came from his dialogue in the early years of the millennium with Habermas. He wrote, ‘It seems to me obvious today that secularism in itself is not in opposition to the faith. I would even say that it is a fruit of the faith because the Christian faith was a universal religion from the very start and consequently could not be identified with any single State; it is present in all States and different in these States. It has always been clear to Christians that religion and faith are not politics but another sphere of human life... Politics, the State, were not a religion but rather a secular reality with a specific role... and the two must be open to each other.’¹⁰ He went on, ‘only in these conditions of healthy secularity can a

⁸ Alasdair Macintyre, ‘After Virtue, University of Notre Dame Press; 2nd Edition (August 30, 1984)

⁹ Jorgen Habermas cited in ‘Habermas and Ratzinger ‘Dialectics of Secularisation’, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, page 35

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, interview on way to France, 12 September 2008

society be constructed in which diverse traditions, cultures and religions peacefully coexist.’ He said, ‘to totally separate public life from all valuing of traditions, means to embark on a closed, dead-end path.’¹¹ His healthy secularism is a definition of pluralism.

And pluralism, which exists in many democracies, is compatible with liberal democracies. But what does all this mean in our cultural and political context? What role should faith, in particular Catholicism play in our society and how should it contribute – through individual or collective action or both? This evening I would suggest that our approach to faith and society, to the role of faith bodies in providing services, most notably education, is a product of a unique historical context and a philosophical tradition born out of that context of which the Catholic Union should be duly proud of its contribution over the decades. Our approach to faith bodies acting in society tells us something about our state and society. But we run the risk that if we do not know our own tradition sufficiently well, and the particular context that gave birth to that tradition, then we might import a model of governance which we think is similar or feasible, but is not a product of our particular cultural context or can’t be exported. That could lead to a rupture in the relationship between state and society, of which the faith dimension is a central element.

In the face of complexity or challenge we cannot abandon all too easily that, which has served us well in recent centuries and which, we have arrived at often after painful and turbulent efforts for inclusion.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, message to new Ambassador to San Marino, 13 November, 2008

Many states (including many Western states) would not tolerate non-state providers or faith-based providers delivering essential services such as education on behalf of the state in the manner it happens in the UK. Or would they? How many times do we hear the French model of laicite cited as one which we could import to the UK? Despite one of the strictest legal separations between Church and State it yet finds a way to accommodate faith schools through the Debre Law of 1959, which enabled Church schools in France to be nearly wholly subsidized by the state (17% of all students in 2011). And all this possible under laicite.

Before we assume the French model of Church and State is a solution to all our problems we might first consider the perspective offered by Professor Michael Troper. He sees French separation or laicite as distinct and unique to France. It can't be picked up and planted elsewhere. It has evolved from the French doctrines of sovereignty and Gallicanism devised in the monarchical period and the later conceptions of liberty and representative democracy inherited from the French Revolution. He points to the path dependent argument of contemporary French Republicanism and laicite and the rules regulating religion. The French doctrine of sovereignty (monarchical, state, then popular) involved the primacy and unity of the political vis a vis all other organizations within the realm, especially religious ones; it also entailed that the civil constitution organizes both state and society in its basic form, leaving no temporal domain immune from civil legal regulation.

For those of you still in doubt you might want to re-read that passage. It is clear that our history and tradition is not that of the French Crown, 1789, the French Revolution and the subsequent Republics and the emergence of an all powerful and dominant state which consumes

society. Our approach was achieved more through evolution than revolution and one which accords faith a role (not a privatised role) in society. Why so?

Because the enlightenment tradition we often talk about is neither a single tradition nor a single Enlightenment. The Enlightenment of 1789 is not the same as that of 1776. Confusing the two can create difficulties in policy choices. The continental and US Enlightenments differ most sharply when it comes to faith and its place in the society. Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the French Enlightenment, as one where, “reason was not just pitted against religion, defined in opposition to religion; it was granted the same absolute dogmatic status as religion.”¹² The French Revolution was more of a belated Reformation, not fought in the name of a different interpretation of religion, but for a different form of authority – a rather narrower defined concept of reason. The Enlightenment in the English-speaking world did not accord reason that pre-eminence and religion was not the paramount enemy. As a result, the English-speaking world had an Enlightenment which was more compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief. The effect on faith has been summed up as a continental enlightenment which was about freedom from faith, to an American Enlightenment which was about freedom for faith.

The policy choices we make will tell us something about the society we want to build and the role of the state within that society and

¹² Gertrude Himmerfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2005, page 152

its attitude to difference (and the right to be different). History has shown us numerous examples of how impossible it is to divorce a culture from its past. How faith communities are treated can often be a litmus test for broader freedoms within the society and the place of the individual vis a vis the state. One can think of revolutionary France or the creation of the Soviet Union. Critiques by faith communities can help to reinforce democratic processes in liberal states by ensuring alternative perspectives are heard and group think is avoided. So a faith perspective not just helps the state through the provision of services, but helps to ensure the very plurality that helps to keep the state liberal i.e. open to challenge open to alternative impetus for change and leadership. Without challenge, democratic states run the risk of becoming illiberal and fostering a culture of uniformity which can be unhealthy for the future of democracy. Western democracies, including the UK need debate, leadership and vibrant differences to remain alive and achieve renewal. It is their oxygen.

A pluralist approach on the part of the state allows for a variety of voices and providers rather than a singularity of approach. A plural space will often be open to greater participation by religious groups and other organizations and avoid authoritarian tendencies. A truly pluralist society will often be characterized by a weaker state often acting as a regulator, but open to a variety of providers meeting acceptable standards and contributing to the flourishing of wider society. This belief in pluralism on the part of the state is not alien to the Catholic tradition – it is central to it and was enshrined in the Second Vatican Council when it said, ‘it is the task of the state to see to it that all citizens are able to come to a

suitable share in culture and are properly prepared to exercise their civic duties and rights."¹³

In this meaning, pluralism is not just tolerance, but exchange and interest, and care for the other. It is not relativism, but respecting distinctiveness. This definition of pluralism would allow, even encourage groups to actively participate and engage in the society as individuals or through collective organizations and would see them as contributing to the common good. For Professor Modood 'the challenge is not how to fully de-Christianize our states but how to appropriately add the new faiths alongside the older ones. He says what is interesting is that those most uncomfortable with this (adding) are not Christians or churches but ideological secularists.'

But at the other extreme, pluralism is not anarchy. A pluralist society is aiming to do just what it says, build or administer a society which will be plural. Its goal is a society by plural means and that will mean regulation and minimum standards. The history of humanity could be said to be about navigating or setting those minimum standards and ensuring a balanced equilibrium between individuals, communities and the state or its historical precedents. It is highly unlikely that the boundaries between state and communities and individuals will be definitively settled. They are always likely to be blurred and that is often the challenge of living in a community, balancing interests, rights and obligations.

¹³ (Gravissimum educationis, 6)

When it comes to religion and across the world that balancing can take many forms. Professor Rajeev Bhargava offers the example from India which contrasts with the more Western approach. He claims that European secularism is finding it difficult to move to society which has deep religious diversity. He suggests that Europe has much to learn from Indian secularism which is characterised as principled distance. But it is not complete separation. It presumes that the state is bound to interact with religions but must do so not governed by religious principles but by the principles that the liberal democratic state is independently committed to; equality, social justice, democracy. While he would argue against established religion, he also holds that it is possible for a secular state to have principled, secularist reasons for rejecting strict separationism. For Professor Modood it is quite the contrary. He favours mild-establishment of religion to dis-establishment to the extent that it holds out the prospect of conferring advantages to religious minorities similar to those enjoyed by the majority religion through multiple establishments that equalize up instead of leveling down. He thinks that this is the direction European societies are taking and should be moving in. Professor Aurelia Bardon argues that liberal democratic principles of political legitimacy require that decisions of the state be publicly justified and that it must give good reasons for its actions, rules and policies. If certain religious reasons are to be ruled out, it must be because they endanger this sort of legitimacy not for other reasons. She would argue that both religious as well as secular absolutist arguments are incompatible with the liberal democratic conception of political legitimacy and public justification. She cautions against a reliance on absolutism of whatever creed – religious or secular.

So now that we have identified what we mean by our world and its cultural context and the various models which might be applicable, what role can Catholicism play in that world and how? Let's examine a specific case; what is the future of state funded Catholic education in the UK?

Much depends on the views of the government and that will come down to how the state sees itself with regard to broader society. If it adopts a pluralist approach as set out above then faith-based education can thrive. However, if it sees itself, as going down a more absolutist state model to the detriment of society then it is unlikely that state funded faith schools will survive in their current form. And while that would be a regret due to the loss of state funded faith schools, it would be an even greater loss to society because of what it would signify, because society would lose some of its most core and basic freedoms at the expense of an ever encroaching state. Ultimately freedom would be impinged, societal and personal. A 'state pays so state rules' approach could lead to difficulties for church bodies providing a public good and engaging in society. Taken to an extreme it could lead to totalitarianism and upset the inherent equilibrium in society, which democratic states rely on. It would reduce or even remove difference and the right to be different.

The purpose of the state is to provide the opportunity for a good life for its citizens, not to define such a life for all citizens, or extract resources from those citizens without representations and adequate checks and balances, nor is the purpose of the state to impose uniform beliefs on a population. While the state can impose reasonable restrictions on the use of public funds, it shouldn't use the threat of deprivation of public funds either as a matter of outright strangulation of

unfashionable beliefs and groups, or to favour unfairly some parts of the plurality over others. That would destroy over time associations and communities that do not take the state line in every way.

The state should encourage what de Tocqueville called the mediating associations between people and the state that carve out room for a good and virtuous life. The risk, as highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre, is that the modern secular state sees itself in competition with such communities and associations, and as its resources grow, it will seek to wipe them out. Ultimately, unless very careful, secular states, with absolutist tendencies can destroy difference and in turn democracy, which requires difference to function and renew.

But also there are risks for faiths. They too must remain in the societal space. They too must contribute beyond their own self or community interest which cannot be too narrowly drawn. Faiths, with a right to occupy a social space must commit to protect and promote the social space of others, and of difference. Threats to that societal space must be tackled collectively, but not by eroding the space for difference in society, but ensuring its distinctiveness within our overall societal context.

So how do we avoid such a situation arising where the state in the western democratic tradition becomes illiberal? What role can Catholicism play in helping to protect that liberal tradition and plurality? One of the principal contributions of Catholicism to wider society is the role played by Catholic schools acting as vehicles of social inclusion and advancement. The question for our era is how we not only ensure the

survival of state supported faith schools, but also to protect the inherent freedoms that go along with them? I would argue that we do that by responding coherently to each of the arguments which are used to attack faith schools and by placing the argument in the wider context and the role such schools play in our society and why.

The practical points, which groups like the Catholic Union must address, are;

First, that faith schools breed hatred or mistrust. The self-styled Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life published a report in December 2015, which addressed the issue of faith based schools and admissions policies. It broadly ignored the Catholic Church in its membership and Terms of Reference, but yet did not shy away from offering opinions on Catholic education. The report stated: 'In England successive governments have claimed in recent years that faith schools and free schools create and promote social inclusion, which leads to cohesion and integration. However, in our view it is not clear that segregation of young people into faith schools has promoted greater cohesion or that it has not in fact been socially divisive and led rather to greater misunderstanding and tension'. The report goes on to recommend that 'Bodies responsible for school admissions should take measures to reduce selection on grounds of religion in state-funded schools'. And at the Press Conference to launch the report I'm told that yet again Dame Butler Sloth cited the example of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland as a negative.

If you forgive me a moment of indulgence and especially with an audience that only includes Great Britain and not Northern Ireland. All

too often I have heard even Catholics in Britain cede ground on the view that Catholic schools in Northern Ireland somehow contributed to the Troubles and bred hatred and mistrust. In my view you mostly hear such a view from ill-informed critics who have never experienced Catholic schools in Northern Ireland and the sterling work they did during the Troubles to hold the line and to prevent the society from slipping into civil war. It can be convenient for an elite or an establishment in Britain to blame religion and particularly the Catholic Church for the Troubles, it sort of exonerates them from their responsibility for sectarianism over the decades and the impact it had on keeping a population down because of its faith. I don't know of anyone who was radicalised by what they were taught in a Catholic school in Northern Ireland. However, I know many who were challenged to think morally and to act courageously and the Church never flinched from its transmission of a strong moral code regarding the taking of human life. Nor is it just in Northern Ireland, recent research by Professor Duncan Morrow on Scotland's Catholic schools showed that they did not cause sectarianism. And as I witnessed first hand in Pakistan - many Christian schools with a majority of Muslim students - are at the forefront of inter-religious witness and have been for decades. They have proved that it is possible to carry on the ethos and identity in challenging circumstances.

The state can and must make legitimate demands of a faith school. They must be a reliable agent of the society's fundamental beliefs about political order. As far back as Plato and Aristotle it was well understood that education played a vital role, and is fundamental to society's health and maintenance, and critical to prevent self-destruction. Faith schools can be accommodated in a society and enjoy state subsidy if they

demonstrate that they teach and support the truths that society as a whole accepts regarding fundamental political order. If a faith school, whether Catholic or other, were to call for the violent overthrow of the legitimately elected government and the imposition of a theocracy, then they could not receive state support and would require the active intervention of legitimate authority to ensure the cohesiveness and the proper functioning of the society.

Second, we are increasingly told that faith schools are not representative of wider society and tend to serve privilege. The most recent statistics for the Catholic schools sector in England show the following. Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than the national average and they take more students from deprived areas. 20% of pupils at Catholic secondary schools live in the most deprived areas, compared to a national average of 17%. 33.5% of pupils in Catholic primary schools are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to a national average of 27%. And Pope Francis in his teaching is challenging us to be at the forefront of reaching beyond the privileged and to be agents of social change. He said last November;

“The greatest failure of education is to only educate within walls: the walls of selective culture, the walls of a culture of security and the walls of a social class. We must be willing to take risks as educators and teach beyond the walls, being more merciful and inclusive.”

Third, we need to trumpet the success of Catholic schools academically and why that is so. They have a higher number of Ofsted ranked good or outstanding schools and students score higher in GCSEs and SATs than the national average. And why is that so? It is because of the wider values and distinct philosophy of education.

Fourth, we are told that faith schools are ghettos which undermine cohesion in society by segregating people on religious difference. Between the Catholic and Church of England they provide close to a quarter of all school provision in England. And far from being ghettos, Catholic schools in England have just over 70% of students coming from a Catholic background and 55% of the teaching staff. Catholic Schools are part of the widest network of education found anywhere in the world and make a rich contribution to the society not only in the local contexts, but also in the global context. Each day the Catholic Church alone is educating nearly sixty million students through its institutions across many cultures and languages.

Conclusion

So how does Catholicism and in particular the Catholic Union engage the world around us? We must give example and take on the arguments posed to us with solid evidence, intellectual rigour and in the example of Pope Francis with a humility, but not weakness. That means we must retain conviction about the offer Catholicism can make to wider society whether through education or other forms of outreach and apostolate. We must do so with conviction. We must avoid the

temptations to be complacent about the future of our societal endeavours or smug about our historic achievements. We must not retreat when we get a robust challenge. Pope Francis said 'do not withdraw from the world but be active'.

In conclusion, I set out this evening to illustrate something of the contemporary cultural context within which we operate. To operate effectively in that environment we must know what it is. For Catholicism to flourish in that world it must take on the arguments of the day and not retreat from them. It must not shy away from offering something radically distinctive in the pluralist space.

To succeed in re-embedding Catholicism in the public square we must set the argument in its widest context and to show that the engagement touches the very notion of freedom within our society. Within that context Catholicism should always make a distinctive offering to the society through a variety of agencies, but in particular through its state supported schools.

Of course such a hybrid model of co-operation between the Church and State will prove challenging along the way. Complexity usually is. But engagement and participation for any faith group, especially Catholicism is always preferable to isolation and marginalisation both for state and church, provided one does not lose independence or distinctiveness to the other. We, more than most other communities in

the UK know the price of isolation and alienation, something which has only recently been addressed in some parts of the UK.

The pluralist context in the UK has given us a wonderful system where faiths can engage and exercise considerable freedom. It is a system that evolved and depends on a delicate equilibrium which must be promoted, explained, and if need be defended from time to time in the political and public arena. That is a key task of the Catholic Union. Our education system is not without its tensions and challenges, but it remains a fine example of a contract within a pluralist society between state and faith which works to the benefit of both, but most of all to citizens. It has the potential to answer a much-needed response to our contemporary culture as we struggle to define and build cohesive communities. It has worked for previous generations and it can work for ours too.

As Catholics we must always believe that the opportunities to serve the greater good and society are much stronger than the challenges and that even the challenges will help us to remain agile, and to refresh our offer and reacquaint ourselves with our own intellectual tradition of why things are as they are. If we do that ladies and gentlemen, then everything is to play for, and we can reinvigorate our contribution to wider society by ensuring a thriving and vibrant Catholic contribution. In so doing we will be protecting pluralism and wider freedoms in society which is in all our interests, whether we are religious or not.

Thank you.