



Theological Postscript

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Harry Reid's *Outside Verdict* can be read as further input to a process of institutional self-examination which has been underway for at least 25 years. It is a strangely encouraging contribution. The ability and endeavours of parish ministers, many of whom work in difficult and disheartening situations, are affirmed. There is an absence of any party spirit – both wings of the church are given a fair hearing and their respective strengths acknowledged. The vitality of much congregational life is recognised. We encounter a willingness to ask some tough questions about the effectiveness of the General Assembly and other areas of church life, while the absurdity of much of what we do is exposed without much difficulty by Reid's acute observations. The book is inevitably shaped by the selection of people interviewed and churches visited. By his own admission too many were Edinburgh-based. And some of the judgements offered are impressionistic and eccentric. One welcomes the badly-needed affirmation of preaching, but what is the measure and meaning of the term 'world-class preacher'?

As an academic and theologian, I have predictable concerns about the lack of theological input — (where is God in all this?) but also the over-reliance on the views of one sociologist of religion, Professor Steve Bruce. An important exponent of the secularization thesis over many years, Bruce is now more isolated in his views amongst other sociologists of religion. In the work of Grace Davie, David Martin, Peter Berger and José Casanova, for example, we find alternative approaches to secularization which suggest both that the thesis applicable in one sense only (the differentiation of functions in society) and also that the decline of established and national religious institutions is also a phenomenon largely confined to modern Europe. Secularisation as the decline of religious activity or its social significance is not an inevitable feature of modernity.



Attention to this European context can protect us, I believe, from excessive guilt about recent numerical decline. The current plight of the Church of Scotland is not explainable in terms of the peculiar faults of ministers, elders, moderators, 121 George Street or the divinity faculties. Moreover, we should be suspicious of solutions which purport to reverse the decline by a sudden change in structure, strategy, personnel or theology – not that these are unimportant or that we cannot make changes for the better or that we should not take more seriously the transmission of faith to our children and grandchildren. But we should beware of simplistic explanations, quack remedies and fey images which promise a return to a golden age of cultural pre-eminence. The statistics reveal that church attendance in other parts of Europe is broadly similar to that in Scotland. Across the continent around 20% attend church once a week. This is much higher in places like Ireland, Italy and Portugal but significantly lower in France and throughout Scandinavia. The trends currently observable in Scotland are therefore part of a wider European phenomenon. In terms of church attendance, belief and custom we are somewhere in the middle of the European league table. Our churches are doing rather better than our footballers.

We are caught here in the grip of wider social and cultural trends which are largely uncontrollable. There is little point in castigating one another or engaging in recriminations. It falls to us to keep the faith at a time of doubt and disaffection, but this is not our fault although it may be our opportunity. Furthermore, we should take heart from the fact that Europe is the exceptional case. Elsewhere, the world remains 'furiously religious' to quote Peter Berger. Whether this be the continued strength of churches in the USA, the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America, the growth of churches in Africa, or the strength of Islam in the Middle East, Asia and Africa the world as a whole is clearly not experiencing religious decline or secularisation. Indeed a scrutiny of the international news quickly reveals the extent to which religious factors play an important role in many of the world most troubled regions - Israel/Palestine, East Timor, Kashmir, and the Balkans.

These sociological observations impact upon theology in different ways. They constrain profound questions about the proper shape, role

and disposition of the churches. How should the body of Christ relate to society? What is its proper function? How is it related to God's purpose for the world? No prescription for the church should evade these issues.

Two ecclesiological claims are here relevant. The first is that the church's identity and success are not determined by its capacity to command a position of cultural dominance. This should be clear from Scripture, the witness of martyrs and a wider study of church history. In the Old Testament, particularly in its latter stages, the faith of Israel under the providence of God is upheld often in exile and dispersion. A day of wider international acknowledgement is expected but this is gradually deferred to the end of time. Similarly in the New Testament we encounter small groups of Christians who live as the church and who look forward to a day when the rule of God shall be complete. But for the present they are called to keep the faith surrounded by a culture which does not yet recognise the lordship of Christ. Second, however, the church like Israel is required not to reject the world nor to confront it in a spirit of shrill condemnation. Like Jeremiah's people, we are called 'to seek the welfare of the city'. This will involve recognition of much that is worthy and instructive outwith the walls of the church, and an accompanying desire to contribute to the common good. The sectarian option of adopting a monotonous counter-cultural voice (apparently the recipe offered by Steve Bruce) is untenable.

Neither cultural dominance nor sectarian withdrawal is a theologically valid option. Both temptations should be eschewed. This might spare us from nostalgia for a golden age of a Christian Scotland. We should note that amongst the most articulate and trenchant opponents of arguments for religious toleration in early modern Europe were Scottish divines such as Rutherford and Gillespie. They perceived here a threat to the identity of Scotland as a unitary, disciplined and rigidly Protestant nation under God. Yet our social future will inevitably be more pluralist, multi-racial and multi-religious that it is even now. In any case, few would probably wish to return to the cramped conditions of an established Presbyterian hegemony. The alternative of withdrawal is more plausible today but also demands criticism. Scripture directs us

to the rule of God throughout the cosmos and not merely within the household of faith or the ark of salvation. Divine action takes place in the world, and not only inside the church. For this reason, we can learn from and make common cause with those not baptised into the church. This prevents resignation from all social and political responsibility, and a simple antithesis of church and world. Worth recalling here is the devastating remark of H Richard Niebuhr that 'at the edges of the radical movement, the Manichean heresy is always developing.' The task of the church is to attest the divine rule and to seek its expression in whatever ways the Spirit makes possible in our day and generation. We can be reminded of this by the social contribution of Jewish communities in the diaspora and the small Christian congregations scattered around the Roman empire. Of course, this does not provide us with a blueprint for the church of the future, yet it does suggest that we will require to devote greater resources and energy at the congregational level to the tasks of Christian education, nurture and moral formation. We have to find a way of doing this without loss of that regional cohesion and oversight by which we enter into an awareness of the church's catholicity. Significantly, many have found the most heartening aspect of Reid's survey to be his discussion of local congregational life and preaching. Less exhilarating is his perspective on the national persona of the church, including the General Assembly with its panoply of boards, committees and annual reports.

One educational task that deserves reinvigoration is that of 'apologetics'. This has ceased, partly under the impact of Barthian criticism, to be a fashionable activity today. Yet whatever its historical defects, apologetics was traditionally perceived as the task of intellectual engagement with the presuppositions, knowledge and practices of contemporary culture. As such, it is closely related to the mission of the church to engage with its host society and a responsibility to educate its membership. This task lay dear to the heart of figures such as Knox and Chalmers, heroes of Reformed Scotland who by Reid's reckoning deserve closer attention. Today is a more auspicious moment for this intellectual work that is sometimes realised. One of the surprising features in my own academic context is that at a time when the number of church candidates have declined steeply there is

elsewhere in the university a greater interest in theology than for many years. With the fading of Christianity from our social landscape there is suddenly a curiosity about its claims, its past traditions and its capacity to make sense of what is otherwise left unexplained. The idea that only God can hold all things together is strangely resonant.

The cosmos we now know to have begun around 12-15 billion years ago with a violent explosion from a single point of infinite density. This is called the Big Bang. But how did it happen and from where did it come? And why should its structure and content in those first milli-seconds after the initial explosion have been so delicately and precisely set that billions of years later stars, planets and conscious life forms should have evolved? Are there multiple universes of which ours is one? Is there no explanation beyond chance? Or is there instead some mysterious purpose being fulfilled in what we detect at the dawn of creation? Modern cosmology leads us towards questions about God. Hence the religious fascination with the writings of Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies and others. We need to respond to this intellectual curiosity.

Other products of human culture also bring inescapable questions about God, particularly our art and our morality. The excitement generated in many of our galleries by new exhibitions of works, classical and modern, is testimony to the religious power of art. The language of order, beauty and transcendence is often required to explain the power of painting, music and the written word. The artist's ability to see the ordinary and mundane as suffused with intense significance reveals the quasi-sacramental function that art possesses. It can caution us, purify us and uplift us, perhaps even bestow a meaning upon what we do and are. Perhaps we have not recognised this with sufficient seriousness in our church life. In John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* the ageing narrator is making a slow and painful recovery from surgery from prostate cancer. He is suddenly struck by the rhapsody of colours he sees from his bedroom window in the trees, shrubs and landscape all around. He writes this. 'I see now too late that I have not paid the world enough attention – not given it enough credit. The radio, between the weather and the stock report, releases a strain from Schubert's 'Drei Klavierstücke', a melody that keeps

repeating, caressing itself in sheer serene joy, and I think of him and Mozart dying young and yet each pouring out masterpieces to the last, rising higher and higher as their lives fall from them, blessing with their angelic ease the world that has reduced them to misery, to poverty, to the filth and fever and the final bed. My eyes cannot help watering, a sure of sign of senility.'

Much of our social practice too confronts us with fundamental questions about God. What happens in a hospice, where the dying are cared for in body, mind and spirit, brings us inescapably to issues about God. These are not places of cure where our bodies are repaired and we are enabled to take our place again as economic agents in the world. We are not made better there, at least not in any conventional sense. Neither is the hospice a place of desolation or of escape before we shuffle off this mortal coil. It is a place of safe lodging before we begin another journey. This work recalls us to the long history of hospitals which were places of mercy first and foremost, even before they became places of cure. And that love offered before the enigma of death and parting leads us to the still greater mystery and mercy of God which encompasses our existence and that of all creatures.

Even economic activity itself is increasingly recognised (as it was by Adam Smith) to repose upon conditions of education, social stability, collective responsibility and civility. These forms of life cannot themselves be characterised adequately in terms of market forces and conditions. Other moral and metaphysical discourses are required to make sense of what we do and seek in our economic life. In all this there is scope for serious engagement with our culture, and an enhanced commitment to adult education in our congregations. This is ineluctably an aspect of our mission. In any case, you can get a decent conversation going on most of the above in any pub or senior common room.

Finally, attention to God might further release us from unnecessary anxiety about the church. At the close of Mark's gospel, having seen the empty tomb and heard the words of the angel, three women lose their tongues through fear and astonishment. The men have already deserted. It is a story of ecclesiastical failure yet it is preceded and

overtaken by God's action. The silence of these first witnesses was only temporary. The good news that Christ was risen from the dead still broke upon the world. So the ending of the earliest gospel can speak to a late modern church troubled by its lack of success.