

Religion and the Public Realm in an Age of Ambivalence: a role for the universities?

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Thank you for the invitation to speak this evening. It is an honour and a pleasure to have the chance to opine on a subject close to my head and my heart. I hope you enjoy hearing my thoughts as much as I've enjoyed having them!

I want to talk about the strange re-emergence of religion as a public category in recent years. And I want to speak about one particular way in which I've been involved in helping that re-emergence along a bit by working with universities to see how they can support a more informed conversation about faith, both in the campuses and more widely.

I say 'strange' because so many people and institutions – including, and in some cases especially, universities - had spent much of the 20th century assuming that humanity had outgrown religion. This was a source of great certainty and perhaps pleasure for some. [SLIDE] Take this, for example, by the well-respected sociologist, Peter Berger:

“...by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture” (Berger 1968)

So public culture, first, is assumed to have become secular – that is, the significance of religion has declined to practical meaninglessness.

Or this, from Sam Harris who thinks that religious thought takes us to:

“...a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible’ (Harris 2006)

He adds that:

“It is imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs ...while religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are ... the danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them holy” (Harris, 2006, pp 48-9, emphasis in original)

So alongside the secular is assumed to be the rational. Religion equals madness. Only ‘no-religion’ can be considered sane, or at least rational.

The philosopher, A C Grayling takes a different though no less unflattering view, arguing that apologists for religion present a ‘perfumed smokescreen’. He says:

“The real perfume in the smokescreen lies in the claim that the contemporary Churches, with their charities and their aid for the suffering in the Third World, are models of goodness in action. They accordingly present themselves as institutions devoted to peace, kindness, brotherly love and charitable works. But this soft face is turned to the world only when the Church is on the back foot ... whenever religion is in the ascendant, with hands on the levers of secular power too, it shows a very different face – the face presented by the Inquisition, the Taliban, and the religious police in Saudi Arabia.” (Grayling, 2004, p 81)

These sorts of polemic views have been rather common recently. They are echoed by the author Christopher Hitchens (2007), who attributes madness and violence to all the major world faiths and numerous episodes in history: from the Crusades, to the European religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, to the role of Christianity and other religions in slavery, to the relationship of the Vatican with 20th-century

fascism, to the Rwandan genocide, al Qaeda and even American televangelism. According to Hitchens, religion is both undemocratic and irrational. Hitchens says:

‘For most of human history, the idea of the total or absolute state was intimately bound up with religion’ (Hitchens, 2007, p 231).

And this cartoon seems a good accompaniment to these views of religion as mad, irrational and dangerous.

And many are concerned, too, about what they see as the moral and ethical impositions of religious faith, especially to do with homophobia and sexism and on issues such as adoption, sex and abortion. Here’s a demo and counter-demo which appealed to me when I was thinking about this. [SLIDE]

Such views as these are a significant part of the public conversation about religion today. They amount to a rejection of religion and its consequent banishment from the public realm – including universities - which must be protected from its madneses. They can be summarized in three main stances:

- Religion is irrational and essentially at odds with reason, science and evidence-based debate. It has no place in universities, or in public debate
- Religion is a source of division and conflict.
- Religion is oppressive, an obstacle to free speech, personal liberty and political democracy, and a threat to a neutral public secular sphere.

These are the assumptions which dominate our public conversation about religious faith, making it all too often a tense, difficult, and confrontational subject. They are all arguments against a legitimate public role for religious faith which assume that, if we ignore religion – or at least keep it private – then it can’t do us harm as a society.

They depend upon secular assumptions which appear in various forms but basically argue that religion and politics must be seen as separate activities, the former being other-worldly and personal and the latter this-worldly, communal and public. Religion is a matter of faith and deals in unbending absolutes, while science and politics require rational deliberation and debate. Religion has little to contribute to public life; rather, it threatens it with mayhem. Public politics and public life should be secular, omitting religion. And universities, as crucibles of thought and ideas, should reflect these assumptions.

What these philosophers, scientists and social commentators are pressing, between them, is an argument for the end of public religion and its relegation to private life. And many thought this had been achieved.

But still some argue that there is a persistent presence of religious faith deeply embedded in society and culture. And the contest between our now dominant ways of thinking about society, and the religious legacies underpinning them, can be a source of the ambivalence we experience about religion as we try to talk about it now. Recognising the persistence of religious faith, and informing ourselves about it, might be a basis for a more thoughtful, engaging and fruitful conversation than the one proposed by those who want faith simply to go away.

Let's look at some of the public spaces in which we might find religious ideas and roots:

- Cathedrals and Abbeys used for services and markers of national significance, including royal weddings, remembrance and memorial services, and celebrations and acts of thanksgiving.
- The monarch talks about her faith in her Christmas broadcast – here are some startling comments from 5 years in her reign:
- That there is a Christmas broadcast at all is a source of surprise – and annoyance - to some, let alone that it explicitly

refers to Jesus Christ. Channel Four has long parodied the broadcast, of course, in its 'Alternative Queen's Speech'

- The coronation – the moment when the new head of state is inaugurated – is a religious ceremony in which the monarch is ordained.
- SLIDE As you can see, it is a very religious moment – or at least it was last time it happened.
- And I'll bet you're glad I don't talk with quite such a cut glass accent as the commentator there!
- And here she is at the state opening of Parliament – head of the church and of state
- And there in the chamber, Bishops sitting as Lords – though one wonders for how much longer (though they were saying that in 1911)
- And here, in the state legislature building, a fully fledged Christian chapel.
- And just to bring in a couple of pictures I couldn't resist – here's the throne being hovered. I have no idea about the faith of the hoverer, but given her ethnicity the chances are that she doesn't have a Christian background, by contrast.
- And here's what she found underneath the throne!
- One more I simply couldn't resist – I don't know what Lady Thatcher said but one can imagine it wasn't part of a lecture about the public role of religion!
- In court we are asked to swear on the 'holy bible' – though alternative civil oaths are now allowed
- With a bit of post-religious irony in this cartoon, thrown in!
- The same applies in parliament
- ...and parliament opens its sessions each day with a prayer
- And universities can be construed as very religious places too
- As an undergraduate at Cambridge, I was surprised at first that there was a grace said every evening before dinner – and afterwards for that matter. Only those who had got a first in their end of year exams were allowed to say it! So I won't reveal whether I was ever allowed to read it!

- And most Oxbridge colleges are dominated by their chapel buildings
- Above their gates are all sorts of religious mottos. Take this one from my old college which is not only religious but is actually written in New Testament Greek.
- The very naming of many Oxbridge colleges is a case in point too – Jesus, Emmanuel, Christs, Trinity, All Souls, St Catherines, St Peters, St Annes, St Antonys, St Edmunds, St Hildas, St Hughes, St Johns, Corpus Christi, Christ Church, Magdalen and, not forgetting, of course, York St Johns
- I was remembering the apocraphyl tale of an applicant to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, who, when asked why he had applied to that college, replied ‘I wanted a college with a non-religious name’. He wasn’t offered a place.
- And it’s not just the old universities either. The heraldry and mottos of all sorts of newer institutions take religious themes and aspects.

Some seem quite straightforwardly, if obliquely, religious, such as:

Durham (ancient) Fundamenta eius super montibus sanctis
Her foundations are set upon
the holy hills

Kings. London (enlightenment and modern) Sancte et sapienter
With holiness and with wisdom

Aberdeen (ancient) Initium sapienti Timor domini The fear of
the Lord is the beginning of
wisdom

Cambridge (ancient) Hinc lucem et pocula sacra From here,
light and sacred draughts

Oxford (ancient) Dominus Illuminatio Mea The Lord is my
Light

Glasgow (ancient) Via, Veritas, Vita The Way, the Truth, and the Life

Keele (modern) Thank God for All

Others could be appealing as much to the enlightenment as to the light of God, such as:

Exeter (modern) Lucem sequimur We follow the light

Cranfield (modern) Post nubes, lux Out of darkness, light /
Beyond the clouds, light

Salford (modern) Altiora Petamus Let us seek higher things

So there is plenty of religion in the public sphere, even if you think it mere anachronism.

The social scientific data about religious faith present an alternative to the secular view, too.

There have been continuing high levels of self-reported religious affiliation across the country (and the world). [SLIDE] In terms of self-affiliation in the 2001 census, Christianity appears to remain the main religion in Britain (72%) (ONS, 2004).

In York, by the way, it is 71.7% Christian, 3% Muslim, 1.1% Hindu, 0.6% Sikh, 0.5% Jewish, 0.3% Buddhist and 14.8% saying 'no religion' – and these figures almost exactly reflecting the national average.

There are debates about all this though, and the sceptics tend to seize upon them. [SLIDE] Another data set, the British Social

Attitudes Survey shows a different picture: 41.5% of respondents say 'no religion' (compared to 15.5% in the UK Census).

And the European Values Survey (UK) is different again: that's a total of self-reporting 'believers' of 37.4%.

And a total of 62.7% saying religion is not important to them.

Though the data are contested, it is possible to conclude two things, as Grace Davie does: on religious adherence, "Statistically there can be little doubt about the trends; they go downwards" (Davie 1999 p52) but does that mean the decline of religion and in the end its disappearance altogether, as Peter Berger anticipated? Grace Davie thinks not. [SLIDE]. She makes an important distinction:

"...on the one hand, variables concerned with feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief demonstrate considerable persistence; on the other, those which measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization" (Davie 1999 pp4-5)

It seems that what we have is a situation of "...high levels of belief and low levels of practice" (Davie 1999 p5). Davie has sometimes called this 'believing without belonging'.

All of this has led Peter Berger to think again. Remember him? In 1968 he said [SLIDE]:

"...by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture" (1968)

By 1996 he was saying this [SLIDE]

“the world today is as furiously religious as it ever was” (1996).

Well, it's a concession of sorts!

But going back to the sceptics' arguments, these sorts of views pervade society in a rather nebulous, generalized sort of way. I think at best we can say that there is a somewhat muddled conversation going on about religious faith, much of which sets religion and science, the rational and the irrational, up against one another, and suggests that the one has displaced the other, if only we'd all grow up and accept it.

But are we really required to choose between scientific and political rationality on the one hand and religious irrationality on the other? Or can the encounter between science, reason and religion contribute to what Bhikhu Parekh has called an enriching and plural 'civilised dialogue' (Parekh, 2005)?

The problem here is that we contrast irrational religion with rational science. But mostly religions are in conflict, not with science, per se, but specifically with the bit of it that relies on reductive materialism. And reductive materialism, in turn, has had the upper hand in public intellectual life for many decades, if not centuries, and has taken hold in many parts of the universities.

What is reductive materialism? Reductive materialism reduces all of what makes up a thing, down to its material life and that's all. The biologist, Richard Dawkins, is a classic example of this approach. He argued in *The Selfish Gene* that we ascribe emotional value to all sorts of things which are really nothing more than biologically driven. For example, what we think of as love isn't really an act of altruism to others but one of self-interest. And in turn we are biologically driven to serve the best interests of our genes by 'loving' those genes most closely in our gene pool, which helps ensure the survival of that pool. So

we love our brothers more than our cousins and our cousins more than our friends, and so on and so on. Perhaps for some of us this calls in to question our memories of Christmas get togethers, disastrous family weddings and the like – or is that just me?

This biological drive diminishes the further we get from genes which share that pool. For Dawkins, this provides an explanation for all behaviours, all of which – everything – are explained in terms of reductive materialism. In the end, we might *think* we're experiencing something meaningful beyond the mere fact of our genes but in reality it is nothing more than the survival drive of our genes. Even 'we' do not exist in any substantive sense except as a cluster of molecules hanging together around our genes for serendipitous reasons. Dawkins has been arguing this point, or versions of it, for 30 years now.

In this film, he argues that the idea of God is the pinnacle of this 'appearance' problem because we think there must be a God because there is order in the world and the universe, whilst in fact, this is merely an 'appearance' and not a reality. Here he is talking about his book, *The God Delusion*. In this clip he restates the argument that science and religion are in conflict because they provide alternative explanations for the universe and he certainly sees religion as deluded and on the wrong side of good sense. [SLIDE].

This seems to me a classic example of the muddle of the public conversation. Dawkins touches on a number of arguments there in addition to the one that religion and science are opposed, such as the absurdity of the idea of 'intelligent design', and that culture and creativity are late evolutionary sideshows. These are also, of course, reductive materialist arguments. And of course the key argument he ended with there – that morality is not the domain of religion - is very strongly put. I include these other arguments as a way of looking at how muddled the public conversation about religion

can be, even amongst academics! Here is a professor of biology, dismissing the idea of God, by drawing on quasi-philosophical arguments which he is at best only limitedly qualified to give, by any academic standards of 'being qualified'. The relationship between biology, theology, philosophy and morality is not explained. Nor is his method for arriving at theological conclusions from biological facts.

For example, one thing he misses which theologians or philosophers might ask, is why the idea of 'being noble', which he finished with there, and he seems to value, is of any importance in a reductive materialist universe – which presumably thinks 'nobility' irrelevant and meaningless except as an appearance of biological pursuit. Another question is what is the source of that idea? How do we recognise 'nobleness' and why do we value it? I suppose Dawkins would answer that 'nobleness' serves a biological function, though he doesn't say what is, and even if he did, he would be speculating, not on the basis of data and evidence, which are the biologists tools, but on philosophical and theological grounds, which are not.

Similar arguments might be asked for example of beauty and art. What function do they serve, in a biological account? What help is it to the selfish gene to recognise and share a sense of the 'beautiful'? And, since we observe that there are categories of 'beautiful things', for example Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, [SLIDE] which we can all agree on, why should this be so? What is it about that clump of paint in that particular arrangement which appeals to so many of us in such a strong and mutually recognisable way? Can it all be traced back to the primeval soup from which we eventually emerged?

At the same time as these very sceptical contributions are being made, we have other voices in the conversation which see faith as a very positive aspect of human being and which, far from seeking to keep faith private, want to argue for a

legitimate public role. Some of these voices are religious themselves, as we might expect. Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Temples, Gurdwaras, community and cultural organisations, faith forums and social action projects are all part of this. Significantly, their voices have been more audibly heard because of another positive voice in the conversation, one with power – and that is the voice of government.

It's difficult to tell at this early stage where the new coalition government will go with religious faith. The Coalition Agreement refers to 'faith' only twice, both times in the context of faith schools. But the out-gone Labour governments under Brown and Blair had a fairly high regard for religious faith and this was somewhat to the surprise of many and to the fury of Grayling, Hitchins, Harris, Dawkins and others. In fact it is indicative of public ambivalence to religious faith that Blair kept silent on the matter when in office, only to launch the Tony Blair Faith Foundation within a year afterwards.

This has led many to wonder why so little was said about it during his tenure as Prime Minister when the most memorable comment on Mr Blair's faith came from his Communications Director, Alistair Campbell, in his famous 'Tony doesn't do God' interjection to an interviewing journalist.

In fact, in public policy faith has been making quite an appearance in the last decade or so. This has itself proved ambivalent, adding another layer of ambiguity to the story of public faith. How is this so?

Early on, the Labour party in Britain talked about faith communities as 'repositories of resources' for the public good – buildings, staff, people and networks (Home Office, 2004) having the potential for building on the traditional service role of faith bodies (for instance in education, housing, fostering and adoption).

This has been echoed in the US too [SLIDE] where there was a thing under Bush called the White House Office of the Faith Based Initiative, now renamed under Obama, the White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. It's been much more controversial there, partly because of the formal separation of church and state and partly because under G W Bush, public funding was often said to be given to services including, for example, alcoholics intervention therapies which relied on prayer, and Christian mental health services designed to 'cure' gay people. Some of our controversies may seem quite tame by comparison.

As well as being regarded as useful in service delivery, faiths have also been recognised by government as having a potentially important role to play in building what they call 'community cohesion'. [SLIDE] Faith bodies, and particularly inter-faith networks, have been identified as important brokers in building better relationships between different communities and social groups, whether on the basis of ethnicity, generation or social class.

This is really important because, since the disturbances or 'riots' in northern England in 2001, this has taken a particular turn and policy makers have sought to mobilise faiths in bridging the distance between what came to be called 'parallel lives'. This was how Ted Cattle described the experiences of white people and Asians living along side one another in Bradford and Burnley. Later that same year, we had 9/11 and some, for example David Robinson at Sheffield Hallam, have noted a swift transformation from the language of race to the language of faith so 'whites' and 'Asians' quickly became 'Christians' and 'Muslims'. This has led Cattle to ask 'is faithism the new racism?'

Government has subsequently seen faith groups as needing to live more closely, whether through an intercultural leadership school for young people in Bradford; an annual cricket and now

football match between imams and clergy in Leicester; or an orientation programme for new migrants in rural Lincolnshire. And funding pots like the *Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund* and *Faith in Action* have been introduced which reflect this prioritizing of religious faith by government. [SLIDE]

And there is a third way (if I dare mention the term) in which government has been interested in the engagement of faiths - what they have been calling 'extended forms of participative governance', which doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. What it refers to is the proliferation of bodies like Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), regional assemblies and neighbourhood management boards (Lowndes and Chapman, 2005; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008). I guess some of you may have been involved in some of these settings.

The involvement of faiths in these ways has been seen as helping in the so-called 'heineken areas' – where faith communities help by 'reaching the parts others can't reach'. Often for example the CofE has a priest, a building and a network even in the most disadvantaged areas where all the other agencies have withdrawn. Or a black majority church can reach out to people who resist other agencies.

And at the national level, the Faith Communities Consultative Council was established to advise ministers on a cross-government basis. And to the horror of the sceptics, the previous Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, John Denham, even appointed a full time 'faiths advisor' to a very senior civil service post in his office in the autumn of last year.

The presence of religious faith in all these formal bits of the government and in public policies has appalled Hitchens, Dawkins, Grayling and others. Indeed, during National Interfaith Week 2009, (funded, by the way, by CLG), at an event held by the British Humanist Association, A C Grayling, along with the

normally reasonable Polly Toynbee from the Guardian, led a seminar on public faith under the banner 'campaigning for an end to religious privilege'.

And this interest in religious faith in public policy has its own policy. This has been most fully expressed in a big national policy called '*Face to Face, Side by Side: a framework for partnership in our multifaith society*', published in 2009. [SLIDE]

But this view is only one part of the 'public policy and faith' story. The other part is one which would be much more quickly recognised by Grayling and friends. This is to be found in a set of policies under the umbrella 'Prevent', which is short for 'Prevention of Violent Extremism'. This collection of policies starts with the observation that:

"there have been a number of high profile cases where extremist preachers, clerics or teachers have taken over, or have encouraged supporters to take over, places of worship and use them to disseminate extremist views and practices. This has included fomenting extremism in others, inciting others to terrorist acts, and, even occasionally, aiding or inspiring the planning of such acts."
(Home Office 2005 p2)

The whole title for this key policy is '*Preventing Violent Extremism: winning hearts and minds*'. And it includes policies about Muslim radicalism on university campus, which has been seen as a big concern.

It talks about having community development workers and local projects working with young people to engage them before trouble brews, which sounds positive enough. But Arun Kundnani in his review of 'Prevent', which he calls 'Spooked', [SLIDE] argues that all the policy has led to is a surveillance society which alienates Muslims and gives an excuse for monitoring Muslim people and constructing them as 'suspects'.

A key plank in his evidence is his correlation of Prevent spending allocations with those areas which have the highest number of Muslim residents. He shows that in the top twenty allocations, the spend matches the density of Muslim population, with the highest population getting the highest allocation, and so on, all the way down to number twenty. [SLIDE] His conclusion is that this can be no coincidence, based as is claimed on an analysis of 'need', but is a straightforward example of policy makers assuming that more Muslims = more trouble to prevent.

So there are both sceptical voices calling for the exclusion of religious faith from public debate on the grounds that faith is anti-scientific, anti-democratic and totalitarian – tending to what the philosopher Rorty has called 'conversation stopping certainty'.

And other voices urging an engagement between them, and with them, as a basis for service delivery, and strong community.

And within that collection of voices – the policy-makers' - there is also a tension between a positive conception of faith as repositories of social goods, and a negative one which sees them as potential sources of violent extremism.

Society is confused. Are people of religious faith its heroes or its villains? [SLIDE]

How can we make of sense of this ambivalence? How can we articulate and mediate a conversation which is better informed, more thoughtful and avoids the knee-jerk reactions which characterise so much of it currently? One answer is dialogue, as we have seen, and another is education, and this is what Tony Blair argues now that he is talking publicly about religious

faith. Here's what the man himself has to say about it now.
[SLIDE]

This extract captures each aspect of the ambivalence I've been describing. Blair talks about religion as a source of violence and conflict. He talks about it as a force for good. He acknowledges, implicitly anyway, that many people think faith should have no role to play, and he makes an argument for why it should. He gets specific about the social action in which many faith communities are already engaged and about being practical, not just abstract. And he talks about faith in terms of its organisational contexts – as structures for delivery of things which governments want (in this case, the 'Millennium Goals').

He does another interesting thing – he talks about the role of education, in schools and universities, in helping shape people's understanding of religious faith and the role it can play.

And this leads me to the work I've been involved in with universities in this context, that I mentioned at the start. This is called the 'religious literacy leadership in higher education programme'.

This is a piece of work which starts with the idea that the universities, of all places, are often construed as defenders of precisely the rational, liberal and enlightenment ideas that they helped to invent. In this sense they could be understood as places of scientific rationalism and liberal democracy, resting upon the rejection of religious myth-making and its totalitarian tendencies – the sorts of ideas underpinning the views we heard earlier. This view has the universities as secular institutions, reflecting secular society.

Our starting point is that we are in a highly plural society in which many faith traditions mix and act in all sorts of differing and sometimes controversial ways, as we have seen. And that

universities can respond to this much more positively than the sceptics would have us.

We COULD respond with scepticism, as some of the commentators I've referred to this evening have been doing.

Or - we could simply ignore religious faith and hope that by doing so it will simply go away.

Or - we could assert and reassert 'secularism', assuming that this means it is our duty to remain neutral on matters of religious faith because it is irrelevant to the public sphere, having nothing to do with what universities are for. And some universities try to do that – as though 'secularism' isn't a stance in itself which will be experienced in practice.

Or we could recognise that there are controversies and nuances, and try to engage with those – intellectually and practically - so that we can help people to enter the conversation in a more informed and thoughtful way.

This latter requires us to be more 'literate' about how we engage with the faiths we encounter, and how we handle the idea of religious faith and its place in society. Hence 'religious literacy'. How can universities help?

One starting point is some ideas from David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, who argues that universities have five key responsibilities:

1. towards future generations;
2. for the formation of people in wisdom as well as through information, knowledge, practices and skills;
3. for uniting teaching and research;
4. for contributing to religious and secular society;
5. and for the fostering of collegiality and good governance.

We could also say that universities are places where people of all faiths and none gather to research, think and learn. Much of their work centres on young people, many of whom go on to become society's leaders of the future.

But at the same time, in many ways universities are also crucibles of the very debates which lead to ambivalence in the first place – many of them think of themselves as centres of liberal thought and intellectual freedoms, of theory, and philosophy which are deeply rooted in post-religious enlightenment ways of thinking, and generators of the very science which is so frequently set up as deposing religion as an explanatory force.

This requires an exploration of the role played by religion in universities – and wider society - as they stand, and the attitudes and assumptions which inform that.

This provokes a consideration of how universities address faith in the whole range of their practical activities. How does it feel to be a student or a member of staff in your university, in relation to religious faith? Is it never talked about? Is it derided for being irrational? Is it respected for having some wisdom or cultural dimension to add? Is it drawn upon to resource initiatives which help people respect difference, and ensure that legislation on equality is not only complied with but also promoted?

Can it make for a more cosmopolitan learning environment? Perhaps it has something to offer to how universities meet the challenges of the cuts which are coming our way, and the unemployment and poverty which wider society faces at a time of recession?

Nobody wants to say only faith has the answers. But we are asking the question, what CAN faith offer, and why should we assume that it should play no role?

This raises two central questions:

1. What sort of culture and practices do universities generate in terms of religious faith?
2. How, if at all, can what they teach, do and say about religious faith help society more widely to have a better conversation about religion, and make constructive use of its resources?

It also means exploring what role religious faith should play—if any—in the intellectual bread and butter of the universities: in research, teaching and learning. Are universities places for the education of the professional or intellectual self alone, where a person goes to gain a qualification in a particular academic discipline or professional role? Or do they have a broader responsibility for the critical education of the wider person, perhaps having in mind in some cases the spiritual and religious dimensions of human flourishing?

And, are these aims compatible, complementary or contradictory, with each other and with the purpose of the universities? Is there the possibility of—or the desire for—engagement with the fundamental ideas, many of them religious, which are inherited and transformed in Enlightenment thinking in which universities are steeped? Does such an engagement imply an enrichment of the liberal arts and scientific rational traditions, or might it threaten to impoverish them, as Dawkins argued in the earlier film?

A C Grayling takes a particular position on this which is interesting. He argues that religion should play no part in what we educate what he calls our 'best minds' as it is quite simply wrong. Here he is speaking on 'Richard DawkinsTV' – yes, such a thing really does exist. [SLIDE]

What A C Grayling says here raises some very important questions. Let's take his example about astrology and

astronomy. He is drawing a comparison to suggest that teaching religion is like teaching astrology when the right way to understand stars is through science (in this way, astronomy). Astrology would be a mere distraction – he calls it a waste of time, which by extension he applies to the study of religion, too. But the science and religion debate is not like the astronomy/astrology one. This is for two reasons.

The first is that science and religion are about different aspects of the universe. We might say that one is interested in human being as it is experienced. The other is about the natural world (including human bodies and consciousness) as it is observable. Astronomy and astrology, on the other hand, are two theories which compete to use the same observed material fact of stars as an evidential basis for differing kinds of knowledge.

The second is that Grayling's argument is focused on the ways in which religion tries to be an explanatory force, which it undoubtedly does in places. But it is also very much an interpretative force, one which takes human experience and turns it over and over, in the light of certain values and outlooks, to explore meaning and experience rather than 'facts'. Science does not merely appropriate 'truth' from religion by being better at it. They are simply interested in two different categories of thing, and two different methods for exploring.

This raises a bigger, more philosophical question, too – what sort of knowledge do universities believe they are dealing with? And what are their appropriate methods for achieving it? A scientific rational approach would be strict in its view that science is the pinnacle of knowledge and the rightly dominant explanatory force for our universe – and our universities. All else is essentially historically interesting rather than currently useable. As Grayling puts it, it might be possible in classes on civics, history or sociology. The implication is that they may be of interest, if not of actual use. The humanities might give

consideration to some pleasant preoccupations – poetry, art, drama and literature for example – but they have nothing really to say about the human condition, which can only be explored meaningfully and purposefully by science. The social sciences aspire, they might say, to scientific status – using empirical and experimental methods, for example, to find things out about the social world which are in some ways parallel to scientific knowledge about the natural world. Some natural scientists continue to demur on this point, seeing the social sciences as mere pretenders to the throne of knowledge.

As for Theology – well, this is frequently regarded as a mediaeval hangover of the university, a defunct explanatory mode which is of interest at best and muddies the clear waters of scientific rationalism at worst. Translate these understandings of the major academic disciplines in to their ‘real world’ counterparts and we find the same assumptions playing out – that science is ‘true’, humanities are ‘nice’ but won’t get you a job, and religion is insane and the cause of all wars.

But we can also observe that such assumptions are increasingly challenged, and this is perhaps part of our ambivalence about public faith. We have a vague sense that everything is relative (a conflation, perhaps of Einstein’s theory of general relativity with Rorty’s version of post-modernism, filtered out to us through the Sunday supplements in the better broadsheet newspapers). Maybe science isn’t true after all.

We hear that the author of the medical paper on MMR has been struck off for getting it wrong, and we’re bewildered by how ‘science’ can be debatable after all.

On climate change, the whole range of argument is kicked around as a political football while a confused public looks on, desperately trying to understand and do what’s best for a world

we can see is under stress and in which what we thought was scientific 'fact' turns out to be something else.

And the science of economics has given us the credit crunch and sovereign debt.

There is a warming to the notion that meaning and truth can reside in a wider range of accounts of the universe than science is able to offer – and that the accounts offered by science are not after all complete or absolute in themselves, either. Does this provide room for universities to think again about the intellectual values and views they defend, explore and develop specifically in relation to religious faith? And can they help society to think more clearly about religion and its public role?

I want to argue the following:

- Religions deserve to be articulated intelligently & publicly, not only so their positive aspects are acknowledged and engaged with, but also so they can be criticised constructively.
- This can challenge any attempt to close down debates with 'conversation-stopping' certainties and absolutes – both from science and religion.
- Religious literacy in universities can help the development of a level understanding which can underpin a much better conversation about faith and what it has to contribute

The issues I've raised here connect to fundamental questions about society, the place of religious faith, and the role of universities. Religion, perhaps more than any other topic of debate, provokes public anxiety, and is often viewed with suspicion or distaste. While there is widespread public awareness of faith there is a limited public vocabulary to deal with the questions it raises, which is, as Grace Davie notes,

“one reason for the lamentable standard of public debate in this field.”¹

I believe that universities have a big role to play in fostering better understanding of faith and discussion of religion in the UK. But this demands nothing less than a philosophical shift in our thinking about the status, role and value of religious faith, not just as a public category but as an intellectual one and a practical one too.

And so to finish off, when thinking about religion in the universities, I found myself wondering - would God get a job in a university? Here are ten reasons why I think he probably wouldn't:

1. He has only a handful of major publications, and the ideas in them are inconsistent
2.And they have no references or bibliography
3.And they're not even published in academic journals
4.And some even doubt that He wrote them Himself.
5. It may be true that He created the world, but, like many professors, after an energetic start, he has been pretty uncreative since
6. The scientific community has had great difficulty replicating His results.
7. He never applied to the Ethics Board for permission to use human subjects.
8. When one experiment went awry, He tried to cover it up by drowning the subjects.
9. He expelled His first two students for learning too much.
10. Some students have complained that he holds very few tutorial hours and those he does hold tend to be inaccessible, eg on mountain tops

I hope you've enjoyed my lecture. Thank you.

¹ Davie quoted in Woodhead, *'Religion or Belief': Identifying Issues and Priorities*, 27..