

Sunday 4 September 2011

Sermon preached by Revd Canon M.C. Kennedy at Sung Eucharist

Romans 1: 20 "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."

I must admit that, living as I do in Armagh, the first I heard of a World Atheist Convention having taken place in Dublin was when I read about it in the Irish Times. And I noticed that along with some of the usual suspects, including the ubiquitous Richard Dawkins, who I suppose could be called the contemporary high priest of atheism - that is denial of God - was one Ivana Bacik, Professor of Law in Trinity College Dublin and a well-known political activist. She had, in fact, sent out to me as to other Trinity graduates, a request to vote for her for election to the Irish Senate. Although I had found her ideas stimulating (I don't think she actually mentioned her atheism) I felt there were other candidates also worthy of one's consideration!

Clearly one did not have more than a very brief summary of the principal speakers' remarks in the report given in the Irish Times. But there was enough there to go on, and having read what Dr Bacik was said to have said I felt she should not get off scot-free for having said it! And I wrote to her. I'm going to give a synopsis of what I said to her as a Christian believer and as a priest of the Church, in a minute, but before doing so I really want to nail the widespread supposition that there are no rational grounds for belief in God. There seems to be an idea that one has to choose, for example, between science - based on evidence - and religion, supposedly a matter of blind faith. That is in fact a nonsense, as demonstrated, for example, in the

long series of carefully written and intellectually challenging books by Dr John Polkinghorne. Dr Polkinghorne is a world-class physicist and a Fellow of the Royal Society - the most prestigious scientific body in the United Kingdom - perhaps the world - and was until recently, President of Queens' College Cambridge. He is also an ordained clergyman of the Church of England and his autobiography is entitled "From Physicist to Priest". He continues to fulfil both roles, one of his most recent books being entitled "Theology in the Context of Science". He actually shows that there is a sort of convergence between scientific modes of thinking and the work of theologians although there are obviously some significant differences as well.

Well, if I understood her correctly, Dr Bacik was arguing that it was perfectly possible to be a morally sound person and also a non-believer - fair enough. My own very highly esteemed elder brother, Denis, whom I buried some years ago in the churchyard in Kildarton, was baptized in infancy, but apart from that had no church connection, not even with a Sunday-School when he was growing up, and was a lifelong atheist - and also a good person. I miss him very much. But what really riled me was Dr Bacik's assertion that atheism, per se, is "profoundly moral and that its central tenet is respect for other's beliefs, with an emphasis on combining reason and compassion". This seemed to me, as a general statement of truth, demonstrably divorced from reality. I said that if it was necessary for Christians to come to terms with uncomfortable truths such as the anti-Catholic Penal Laws in Ireland, or, to take another example, the Spanish Inquisition I did not see how atheists could be excused for ignoring some of the horrendous misdeeds perpetrated by their fellow disbelievers. I pointed out the obvious, that three of the most powerful and wicked figures of the mid-twentieth century, Hitler, Stalin and Mao, espoused ideologies of which atheism was a central

tenet, and their crimes and those of their atheistic regimes were so monstrous as very nearly to surpass human comprehension. And all three were, quite specifically, anti-Christian. I noted that I was, of course, familiar with Richard Dawkins' attempt to explain this phenomenon away in his "The God Delusion." I said I did not think many people who were aware of twentieth century history would find his special pleading any more convincing here than in any other aspects of his anti-religious writings. The problem of evil, I said, exists for atheists as well as for theists and had to be faced honestly by both. As against her assertion of "respect for other people's beliefs with an emphasis on combining reason and compassion" I pointed out that every possible effort had been made, for example in the former Soviet Union, not only to deny religion but to indoctrinate pupils in atheism for the entire seventy years of the existence of that unhappy state.

She also alleged, if I understood her correctly, that people only believed in religion because they took it on the authority of other people and the institutions in which religion was embodied. That didn't, as I pointed out, actually fit my own situation since I came from a non-churchgoing family although my mother and father were favourably disposed to religion and in their private capacity were Christian believers. It was my tormenting my mother at the age of seven or eight to allow me to join a church choir that led to my going - on my own, Sunday by Sunday - to All Saints' Blackrock (whose vicar was the Precentor of this Cathedral Church) and this set me on the road to where I now am. Whatever pressures towards churchgoing that existed in society then did not apply to me personally, and I would reckon there are very few people, either in my own two parish churches in the Diocese of Armagh or, for that matter in the nave of this Cathedral Church this morning who are there because anyone has made them come. In today's secular world and in a country where there

has in fact been a massive falling away from church attendance it is the person who practices their faith who is the against the stream.

I finished my letter by pointing out the glaring gaps in the arguments of several very distinguished people who have declared themselves publicly as atheists. I took as an example Stephen's Hawking's view that everything goes back (variously, it's not clear) to the existence of gravity and put in capitals the word WHENCE? after this with a question mark) or to the laws of nature (I put in another WHENCE? for where did these come from?) and said he leaves actually unanswered the question of WHY is there a universe (or multiverse if such it be), and ended "Why is there SOMETHING rather than NOTHING?!" Ever.

I could have pointed out that the world's most academically prestigious atheist philosopher, Dr Antony Flew, who had written over 50 books and articles against belief in God, changed his mind some years ago, no longer being convinced by his own arguments and wrote (with a collaborator) a book explaining why. The cover of his book amusingly has "There is no God" with the "no" crossed out and the word "a" put in: "There is a God", with the subtitle, "How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind"! He was even convinced by the weight of evidence that Our Lord Jesus Christ did actually rise from the dead. He died himself a year or two ago.

By the way, I am still waiting for a reply to my letter to Dr Ivana Bacik.