

2009 Annual Theos Lecture
Religion in Twenty-First Century Britain
Lord Sacks of Aldgate
4 November 2009

Libby, thank you very much indeed. It's an enormous privilege to be sitting in the same room as Libby. She is one of my and Elaine's very favourite writers and we thank you so much for being here.

I thank you also Paul Woolley and Theos for the opportunity - I am an enormous fan of your work. Public theology is not particularly well known in Britain - it has a much bigger place in the United States - but it is going to become more and more relevant in the years ahead and I wish you every blessing and success.

You've set me a tiny little subject tonight: "Religion in the Twenty-First Century" and I am reminded of the occasion, which may be apocryphal, when George Bernard Shaw was invited to give a lecture on English literature and asked how long he had. The chair said, "You have eight minutes," and George Bernard Shaw said, "How am I supposed to say all I have to say about English Literature in eight minutes?" To which the chairman replied, "Speak very slowly".

So, I will speak slowly tonight, but all I can do is to open some large questions - because the question is so vast - and very simply, from my perspective, three questions:

1. Why has religion survived?
2. What is its place in the liberal democratic state?
3. What are the opportunities and imperatives for the future?

1. Why has religion survived?

Let me begin, not in the twenty-first century, but quite deliberately in the nineteenth, in an encounter which I regard in retrospect as one of the most significant of modern times.

The year is 1830 and a very bright young French diplomat called Alexis de Tocqueville visits America to see for himself this new kind of society, and what he sees astonishes him. He comes from a Europe in which religion is dying, presumed dead - every self-respecting French and indeed Continental intellectual believed that in 1830. Laplace had already said when asked "What is the place of religion in your system?" he replied "*Je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse*" (I don't need religion to explain the universe.) and Tocqueville was going to a country which in the First Amendment had made a principled

separation of Church and state. And what he saw when he first went to America was extraordinary. America, he discovered, was a very religious country indeed. This is what he wrote in 1832:

Eighteenth century philosophers had a very simple explanation for the gradual weakening of beliefs. Religious zeal, they said, was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread. It is tiresome, that the facts do not fit that theory at all.

This year, 179 years later, the editor and the Washington correspondent of *The Economist*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, published a book entitled *God is Back* - in effect saying exactly the same thing as de Tocqueville had said all those decades earlier. Everywhere, except in Europe, religion is growing – from the mega churches of America to China, where the weekly attendance at church services is far more than the membership of the Communist Party.

So here, despite more than a century of atheism - from Nietzsche's 'God is dead' to Matthew Arnold's 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar of the retreating tide of faith' all the way to today's angry atheists, whom I call the intellectual's equivalent of road rage – all the way, through all of that, God is back and Europe as a whole still doesn't get it.

It is our biggest single collective cultural and intellectual blind spot. In fact - and here is an extreme example but it is an extraordinary one - some people today who are most convinced that religion is irrational and altogether outmoded, are nonetheless queuing up to get their children into faith schools. And they still don't fully understand the contradiction.

The survival of religion in the twenty-first century cuts across some of our most basic intellectual assumptions. After all, how can anyone still need religion if: to explain the universe we have science; to control the universe we have technology; to negotiate power we have politics; to achieve prosperity we have economics. If you're ill you go to a doctor, not a priest. If you feel guilty, you go to a psycho-therapist, not to confession. If you are depressed you take Prozac and not the book of Psalms. And if you seek salvation you go to our new cathedrals, namely shopping centres, where you can buy happiness at extremely competitive prices.

So why has religion survived? The answer is – to cut through several volumes of potential literature - that *homo-sapiens* is the meaning-seeking animal. Alone among life forms we ask the big questions. Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? And to understand why these are religious questions, consider the four alternatives that the last two or three centuries have produced:

- i. The market
- ii. The state
- iii. Science

iv. Philosophy

i. The market

The market of course gives us choices, but it cannot tell us which choices to make. The market fails to deal – or in principle, and I think rightly, refuses to deal - with what are called ‘second order evaluations’. We have wants, appetites, desires, but we are also capable of standing back and passing judgement on those desires; between those we feel that we may or ought to satisfy and those we feel we ought not to satisfy. Economics, in principle, does not deal with second order evaluation. The market tells us the price of things; it does not in principle think of telling us the value of things. The market is at best neutral toward, and at worst destructive of, some of the fundamental values on which society depends: values like loyalty, and honesty, and responsibility, and social solidarity. And in the wake of the financial collapse of 2008 and the scandal of MPs’ expenses I don’t think I need to labour the point; there are no meanings in markets.

ii. Politics and the state

What singles out liberal democratic politics from all others, what makes liberal democracy quite different from Athenian democracy (the democracy of Athens in the fourth century before the Christian era) is very simple. In Athens, the citizen served the state; in liberal democracy the state serves the citizens. In Athens, the state embodied the good, the noble and the true; in liberal democracy the state delivers services in return for taxes. For us, politics is managerial and procedural and it is built on the principle, again rightly I think, that morality is my business and not the business of the state.

So there are no meanings in liberal democratic politics either. And this is not, incidentally, a failing; I think this is what makes them the great institutions they are.

iii. Science

What then about science? Again, the answer is quite simply no, and that, as a simple matter of intellectual principle. Science studies causes not purposes. And they are completely different ways of thinking. Science, to explain any event, must look back because a cause always precedes its effect. So a scientist seeking to explain something is always looking at what preceded it. When it comes to purposes - meaningful behaviour - always what explains my act is not something in the past, but something in the not-yet-realised future, which I believe my act will bring about or bring nearer. So, they are different kinds of intellectual activity.

Again, to gloss over another few books, my way of putting it - the simplest I've come up with - is this: science takes things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean. And that is the fundamental difference between the two. I don't have any argument with science at all, but they are different kinds of activity and you will not find meaning in science. Of course, some of the great scientists - Steve Weinberg in particular - have been very eloquent on this point.

iv. Philosophy

Finally, philosophy. I have to say that I didn't begin wanting to be a Rabbi, I began wanting to be a philosopher. I got to know the late Isaiah Berlin quite well towards the end of his life, and I always remember the first conversation we had in our home, he said "Chief Rabbi, whatever you do, don't talk to me about religion. When it comes to God I am tone deaf!" He said, "What I can't understand about you is you studied philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford, how is it you believe?" and I said, "Sir Isaiah, if it helps, think of me as a lapsed heretic". "Quite understand, dear boy," he said. And that actually is the truth. I gave up philosophy because at that particular time when I was studying it, Philosophy had declared as a matter of principle that the search for meaning is in itself meaningless. And because we cannot, to remain human, give up that search for meaning, I gave up philosophy instead.

I might add one particular point - although I still do teach, read and admire it - there is a footnote I would like to add, that I think people don't fully understand. As we know, there are some people who believe still in the twenty-first century that God is an old man, with a long white beard and his name is Charles Darwin. Now, people think that Darwin refuted religion. As a matter of fact, Darwin did nothing of the kind. What Darwin refuted was Aristotelian science, on which a great deal of Christian theology, what is called Natural Theology, was based. Aristotle believed that there were purposes in nature, and by studying nature you could discover the purpose in things. That never was a Jewish belief - it happens to be a belief of a certain kind of synthesis between Hellenism and Christianity. So, actually, the new science is more of a challenge to a certain kind of philosophy than it is to religious belief. And I don't know anyone who has said that.

So, if we search for meaning, we will not in the twenty-first century find it in the market, in the state, in science or in philosophy. It is that principled abdication of the search for meaning by the four great institutions of modernity that has created the space which religion has returned to fill, and which indeed it always did fill. In Stephen Hawking's words "Religion is about the thing that breathes fire into the equations." In Karl Marx's words "Religion is the heart of a heartless world." It is our last best hope if we seek to find meaning, as people in the Abrahamic monotheisms have always tried to do, in concepts like freedom, justice, human dignity, compassion, love, forgiveness and hope. I think it was

Philip Larkin in his very famous poem *Church Going* - a man who had lost belief, but nonetheless put it best - speaking of the church, as you remember, he said:

*A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious.*

And that is why religion will never be obsolete, so long as we continue to be the meaning-seeking animals. That is why religion survived.

2. What is the place of religion in the liberal democratic state?

Again, the best answer was given by Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville was absolutely fascinated by what gave religion such power in America in the 1830s. And he describes how this was a puzzle to him and he asked people including, above all, clergy. The answer they all gave him – this was 1830, don't forget – the answer they all gave him was: "Religion has influence in America because it never gets involved in politics." He asked them why, and they replied, "Because politics is divisive, and if religion ever got involved in partisan politics, it too would be divisive". And that was true then, and it remains true today.

What then did he see religion doing in the United States? He saw that it sanctified the family, that it created community, that it encouraged philanthropy, that it built schools, that it taught responsibility, that it brought people together for the common good. It created what Tocqueville called "the art of association" and another beautiful phrase, "habits of the heart," which he described as "the essential apprenticeship in liberty." He saw religion as the essential counter-balance to what he described – again 180 years ago - as "the greatest danger facing America." It was a new phenomenon in those days and he had to invent a word to describe it, and the word he invented was 'individualism'.

He in other words saw that religion was the counterweight to individualism, and because of that it sustained a free and democratic society. In the terminology of today, we would say that religion sustained the third sector that is not the state, that is not the market but it is civil society. Here are two little passages from Tocqueville when he says just this (it's an eloquent little book, and I re-read it every year), he says: "In the United States, religion exercises but little influence on the laws and upon the details of public opinion, but it directs the customs of the community, and by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state". And again in the introduction to *Democracy in America*:

Liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles, and all its triumphs - as the cradle of its infancy and the divine course of its

claims. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality and morality as the best security of law and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom.

So, we would expect, if Tocqueville got it right, to be able to test that in practice. If Tocqueville was right, then we would expect any society in which religion declines, in that society, civil society would decline. Families would become fragile, marriages would decline, communities would atrophy, society would cease to have a shared morality. And by those tests, 100 years later, Tocqueville got it exactly right.

Now I am going to do something here which is deliberately provocative, but why should the angry atheists get all the best tunes? So let me give you two very provocative examples; let me begin with the neo-Darwinians. After all, it's their year – the 200th anniversary of Darwin and 150th of *The Origin of Species*. I haven't seen this argument ever presented before; a five step neo-Darwinian refutation of neo-Darwinism.

1. A person is, in Richard Dawkins' beautiful phrase, "a gene's way of making another gene". So forget religion, forget values, forget ideals, its all about reproduction; handing on our genes to the next generation.
2. Europe today is the most secular region in the world.
3. Europe today is the only region in the world which is experiencing population decline. As you know, zero population growth – a stable population – requires an average of 2.1 children for every woman of child-bearing age in the population. Not one European country has anything like that rate today. Here are the 2004 figures: In the United Kingdom: 1.74, in the Netherlands: 1.73, Germany: 1.37, Italy: 1.33, Spain: 1.32 and Greece: 1.29.
4. Wherever you turn today anywhere in the world, and whether you look at the Jewish or Christian or Muslim communities, you will find the more religious the community, the larger, on average, are its families.
5. The major assault on religion today comes from the neo-Darwinians.

From which it follows, as night doth follow day, that if you are a true neo-Darwinian believer you want there to be as few neo-Darwinians as possible. QED.

Now, actually, it sounds like a joke, but beneath it, is a very serious point indeed. Parenthood involves massive sacrifice: of money, attention, time and emotional energy. Where today, in European culture with its consumerism and its instant gratification 'because you're worth it', in that culture, where will you find space for the concept of sacrifice for the sake of generations not yet born? Europe, at least

the indigenous population of Europe, is dying, exactly as Polybius said about ancient Greece in the third pre-Christian century. The century that is intellectually the closest to our own – the century of the sceptics and the epicureans and the cynics. Polybius wrote this:

The fact is, that the people of Hellas had entered upon the false path of ostentation, avarice and laziness, and were therefore becoming unwilling to marry, or if they did marry, to bring up the children born to them; the majority were only willing to bring up at most one or two.

That is why Greece died. That is where Europe is today.

Now, that is one of the un-sayable truths of our time. We are undergoing the moral equivalent of climate change and no one is talking about it. Albert Camus once said that the only serious philosophical question is “Why should I not commit suicide?” I think he was wrong. The only serious philosophical question is “Why should I have a child?” And our culture is not giving a very easy answer to that question.

The second un-sayable proposition: At the end of his famous 1957 lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, one of the great statement defences of liberty of our time, Isaiah Berlin famously quoted a statement of Joseph Schumpeter: “To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.” To which Michael Sandel, this year’s Reith lecturer, Professor of Political Philosophy at Harvard University; and I in the book I wrote called *The Politics of Hope*, ask the following question, “If your convictions are only relatively valid, why stand for them unflinchingly?” You cannot defend a civilisation on the basis of moral relativism. In a head-to-head contest between a moral relativist and a fundamentalist, who wins? The fundamentalist must win because he is sure he’s right and you are not sure he’s wrong. Or, as they say in America, a liberal is someone who can’t even take his own side in an argument. There’s a wonderful man I love dearly, a novelist from Israel called Amos Oz, and at one time when there was a lot of difference between secular and religious in Israel, I did a big public conversation with Amos, just to show that we can talk respectfully and I think even lovingly. He began with the following sentence: “I’m not sure I am going to agree with Rabbi Sacks on everything, but then on most things I don’t agree with myself.”

In 1989, as the Cold War ended, as the Berlin Wall fell, people thought that liberal democracy was about to conquer the world. Twenty years on - after Bosnia, after Kosovo, after Somalia, and Iraq and Iran, and Afghanistan - does anyone believe that any more? Now after 9/11 many politicians here and in the United States said that the battle against terror is as much a battle of ideas as it is of weapons. Eight years on ask yourself the following question: “Which ideas?” Freedom? Democracy? Autonomy? Rights?

Will freedom persuade somebody who believes that submission to God is the highest value? Will democracy persuade somebody who believes that the will of God takes precedence over the will of the people? Will autonomy persuade somebody who believes in obeying God's will, not my own? Will rights persuade somebody who believes that the first of all rights is the right to obey the voice of God? Not only has the battle of ideas not been won, it hasn't even been fought.

Liberty of conscience, the peculiarly modern form of liberalism that we inherit today was born not in a secular age but in the most religious age of modern times, namely the seventeenth century. And it was built not on moral relativism but on moral absolutes. Among them, the non-negotiable dignity of the human person, the sanctity of human life, the imperative of conscience and the consent of the governed. All those things are not moral relativism they are what has come to be called the Judeo-Christian heritage. The idea that you can lose the moral foundations of freedom without eventually losing freedom itself is simply absurd. All credit to Isaiah Berlin who though he was a relativist, or what he calls a pluralist, actually saw this and said just before the end of the lecture I just quoted:

It may be that the kind of freedom that we enjoy today is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilisation; an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognised, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension.

Isaiah Berlin saw clearly that on his own philosophy, freedom was indefensible if it ever met a singularly determined opponent.

So to repeat. Tocqueville was right: the place of religion is in civil society where it achieves many things essential to liberal democratic freedom, but two in particular: Number one, it sanctifies marriage and the family and the obligations of parenthood; and number two, it safeguards the non-relativist moral principles on which Western freedom is based. That is why Tocqueville described religion as "the surest pledge for the duration of freedom."

It may not be religion that is dying, it may be liberal democratic Europe that is in danger, demographically and in its ability to defend its own values. That is the second point, where does religion belong in a liberal democratic society?

3. What are the opportunities and imperatives for the future?

Finally, I end with a simple question – what is the way forward? Does it mean, given all I've said, that we have to march back to the nineteenth century or the seventeenth century? Clearly not. Religion is going to grow in strength in the twenty-first century and a very great deal will depend on what kind of religion it is.

At the moment, the fastest growing religions in the world are those who take an adversarial stance towards society, religions that challenge liberal democratic freedoms, and that is bad news.

Worse than that, sadly, is that in various parts of the world, political conflicts - conflicts that were once clearly political - have now become religionized. And once that happens they become insoluble because compromise in politics is a virtue and in religion it is a vice. All peace depends on compromise and that is why peace comes to seem to some religious groups to be a form of betrayal which is why peacemakers get assassinated. And therefore I believe we have no choice but to articulate an intellectually open and humble and tolerant religiosity as the only strong enough defence for some of the religiosity that is coming our way with the force of a hurricane. I believe the way ahead lies in at least the following three directions:

Number one: I believe that we are ready for a new dialogue between religion and science. I believe almost everything about recent scientific discoveries – whether it be in cosmology or neuroscience or the mapping of the human genome - are awe-inspiring and have deeply religious implications.

Not least for instance the discovery of DNA and the genome: we now know that all life on earth from the simplest bacterium to you and me comes from one single source. All life speaks the same language of A-C-G-D – that, as I argued in my book *The Dignity of Difference*, is what I regard as the fundamental truth about mono-theism. The unity up there creates diversity down here.

Number two, it's very interesting that while the genome was being mapped everyone was expecting it to come up with this number of 100,000 genes; as we know it turned out – and this was one of the great surprises of the project – that there are only 20-30,000 genes, which means that genes aren't selfish at all, they're team players, which I think is quite nice. I always said about the genome, the great miracle is that a whole bunch of selfish genes get together and create selfless people which I think is fabulous.

I believe that biology is right now giving us wonderful new insights into the origins of altruism and the universality of morality. The biggest refutation of moral relativism is today coming not from religion and not from philosophy but from science itself. I haven't got time to talk about this, but I would recommend any of these three books which were published this year, two in America and one in Britain. The British one is a book by James Le Fanu, called *Why Us?* and the two American books are Dacher Keltner's book *Born to be Good* and that wonderful man on primate politics, I don't know if you've read Frans de Waal - you want to understand the politics of the European Union, read Frans de Waal on who's going to be Alpha Male and all that stuff, it's great stuff - Frans de Waal has just written a book, published a couple of weeks ago, called *The Age of Empathy*. Any one of those three books - all written incidentally by non-believing scientists, there's not a word of religion in any of them - this is the kind of science

with which religion can have a serious conversation because it's enthralling and enormously hopefully about the human future.

Secondly, I believe that the big global issues - like climate change - are crying out for the unparalleled power of religion, nothing else has this kind of power to recruit energies on a global scale. To give you the obvious example, the great global programme of 2000 of international debt relief was called 'Jubilee 2000' because it began as a religious initiative - I believe it began in the Vatican - based on the Biblical principle of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." That began as a religious movement and became a political and financial movement of international debt relief.

More recently, two very distinguished scientists, neither of whom is religious, both are atheists, EO Wilson, the inventor of socio-biology and conciliance and Lord May in this country, the former chief scientific advisor to the government and former president of the Royal Society both proposed an alliance between religion and science to combat global warming. And that is exactly what the faith leaders in Britain did last Thursday at Lambeth Palace, we came together to sign a joint declaration on climate change – our commitment to it and to working for it in our constituencies - that will be taken by the British Government to Copenhagen on 9 December.

In general, religions are much more suited to the world of the twenty-first century, than our nation states. The future of nation states, as I wrote in a book of mine, *The Home we Build Together*, is extremely doubtful. In the current situation Philip Bobbitt the American thinker believes we have already passed beyond the nation state into what he calls the market state. But one way or another, religions think global and act local. The twenty-first century imperative and they do so better than any other organisations, except the great NGOs. So my second point is not just a dialogue between religion and science, but a major engagement of religion with scientists and with economists on issues such as global poverty, climate change and so on. And that will lead religion in the most constructive direction I can think of.

Finally, religious groups in the liberal democratic state must be prepared to enter into serious respectful conversations with secular humanists, with charities, with other groups in civil society about the nature of the common good and the kind of society we wish to create for our grandchildren not yet born. At the moment we don't fully have this. At the moment in Britain I would say that religious groups tend more to act as pressure groups or lobbying groups than as conversation partners. But, that conversation is there to be had and I hope Theos will play a part in facilitating it. It is doable.

Just think of this. Every time I do *Thought for the Day* – I have to say *Thought for the Day* really appeals to the sadist within me. All these people just about to bound out of bed and enjoy the day and then somebody gives you a sermon and you want to go straight back to bed! - every time I do *Thought for the Day*, I am

speaking to an audience 99.5% of which isn't Jewish which is a challenge. I tried to find a precedent in the whole of Jewish history – I had to go back to Jonah for the last time! Incidentally, what Jonah discovered is still true; it is much easier preaching to non-Jews than to Jews. If you read the book of Jonah, you'll find that Jonah said five words to the inhabitants of Nineveh, in Hebrew, 'In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed' – five words and the whole population repented! All the other prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah - they spent their whole lives preaching to Jews and nobody listened for a moment! Who is this guy? So there we are.

The third thing is we have to be part of the public conversation. Little things like *Thought for the Day* show how easy it is to do without being a pressure group, without seeking to impose our will on others, just seeking not a vote. Not a veto, but a voice in the conversation.

So, let me be blunt. Either we win, or the fundamentalists win, and that is the challenge. If the fundamentalists win I wouldn't hang around too long.

So, let me summarise my argument.

1. Religion is our greatest legacy of meanings.
2. Religion belongs to civil society and not to partisan politics.
3. All of us, believers, atheists, agnostics, are in this together and we must learn to speak to one another and listen to one another.

I end with this, a very simple story. When I became Chief Rabbi in 1992, I decided everyone was looking out of shape and I decided to organise a Chief Rabbi's marathon. Being the Jewish community, the run turned into a walk, 26 miles turned into three and in the end we had an extremely slow walk around Kensington Gardens. It was very nice, we had 5,000 people raising money for 110 different charities. The Sunday before, the organiser said "Wouldn't it be sensible if we did a rehearsal to check for any flaws?" So, six of us got together a week before to do the walk, and within five minutes we had gone in six different directions – this is a Jewish trait which has stayed with us through the ages! They said to me "If six of us can't walk in the same direction what's going to happen next Sunday when we've got 5,000 people?!" I said "Very simple," I said, "You see that bridge over the Serpentine at the end of the horizon? Get somebody to stand there with a big megaphone and say 'Food this way'."

Friends if we can look hard enough towards the future we may be just be able to overcome the injuries of the past.

Thank you very much indeed.