‘GOD IN THE CITY’

a) Introduction

As I begin this lecture, my mind turns to the morning of 17 September, 2010, when Pope Benedict entered the Waldegrave Drawing Room at St Mary’s University College, Twickenham. There he met leaders – religious leaders, civic leaders, leaders in sport, industry, public service and other walks of life. What distinguished them was the fact that they were all women and men of profound religious belief, though from different traditions, who brought that gift to bear on their professional careers and achievements.

This is what made this gathering the first of its kind ever to take place in a Papal Visit anywhere in the world. Normally ‘inter-religious’ gatherings bring together the “official leaders” of the various religious communities. But this was a bringing together of a different kind of religious leader: leaders in a wide range of different spheres whose belief is integral to their leadership. It was a gathering consistent with the overall focus of the Papal visit to the UK, which was to propose to our countries that ‘faith in God is not so much a problem to be solved but a gift to be rediscovered.’

The Holy Father recognised the character of the meeting. He said: ‘The presence here of committed believers in various fields of social and economic life speaks eloquently of the fact that the spiritual dimension of our lives is fundamental to our identity of human beings, that man, in other words, does not live by bread alone (cf Deut 8.3). As followers of different religious traditions working together for the good of the community at large, we attach great importance to this ‘side by side’ dimension of our cooperation, which complements the ‘face to face’ aspect of our continuing dialogue.’ (Pope Benedict XVI, 17-9-10)

These words give shape and guidance to my comments this evening in which I would like to explore certain aspects of this ‘working together for the good of the community at large.’ As the Pope said: ‘We engage with the world wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, but always with a view to serving that higher good – God – lest we disfigure the beauty of creation by exploiting it for selfish purposes.’

At the start of these remarks, I would like to pay tribute, in this same spirit, to Melanie Jane Wright in whose memory this lecture is being held. You will know, and I have learned, that Melanie was both a Cambridge and Oxford graduate with a particular interest in the interdisciplinary study of religion and culture. From 1998-2007 she was Academic Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, now part of the Woolf Institute and central to its development of graduate studies in these topics, not only here but also with the Anglia Ruskin University. Just as importantly, she lived a practical commitment to improving the relationship between Jews and Christian and, as an undergraduate, was active in establishing the Cambridge University Society for Jews and Christians. She was, I am reliably told, far more concerned about what people did than what they said, knew, or professed to believe. Let her, too, be our guide this evening.

It is also a pleasure to be here in St Edmund’s and to be a guest of the Master, Professor Paul Luzio, and fellows. St Edmund’s enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a college known for its friendliness – something I have certainly experienced tonight.

The college is a distinguished and constituent part of this great university. One of the qualities that give it a special place in the story of Cambridge is its historic and still vibrant connection with faith and the Catholic Church in particular, a tradition reflected especially in the contemporary work of your research institutes, such as the Von Hugel. Many of those who have given great service to the Church have passed through St Edmund’s; including some I have known such as David Konstant, emeritus Bishop of Leeds.

So St Edmund’s is a particularly suitable venue for this lecture because it combines many of the elements that I want to discuss – above all the shared commitment we have to fostering contributions to the wider society of which we are a part.

b) The University

The first dimension of the relationship between religious belief and the common good I would like to touch upon concerns education itself and the role of the university. This was part of the context for the State visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom because of its focus on John Henry Newman, whose beatification by the Holy Father was such a memorable part of those days.

One of Pope Benedict's challenges to us, as he made clear in Westminster Hall, was to emphasise the unity of faith and reason and to suggest that this dynamic harmony, if recognised, can be a uniquely rich source for reflection and social action. This truly informed rationality has been a theme that he has explored throughout his life, perhaps most strikingly in his dialogue with Jurgen Habermas.

For the Holy Father one of the major theatres for exploring that engagement between the life of the spirit and the life of the mind is the university.

Cardinal Newman recognised the civilizing role that a university could play in creating a person open to the truth in all its manifold forms; something that has resonated strongly with Pope Benedict who, like his predecessor John Paul II, enjoyed a career as a scholar and professor.

Newman's noble and ennobling vision was of a university in which a truly "liberal" education is pursued in which a "habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom." This is "the special fruit of an education furnished at a University." (Discourse 5: The Idea of a University)

That belief, allied to Newman's insights on the unity of knowledge and that its pursuit is an end in itself, remain hallmarks of an education that humanises rather than atomises. This approach succeeds, when it is tried, because it recognises truths that develop us integrally, enlarging both intellect and soul.

Contemporary universities, as you will know better than me, face many challenges: adequate funding; fair access for all who would benefit; and the balance between the role government should play and the essence of a university as a self-governing society, to name only a few.

However, I want to return to one fundamental aspect of the moral character of a community of learning that can easily be lost. That is the importance of encouraging the integral development of all those who form part of the university; something that involves a constant struggle not only for technical and disciplinary prowess but also the fostering of the virtues that any community requires in order to flourish. Virtues are habits of the heart and mind by which we behave generously and correctly. Virtues are acquired by practice. They tutor us in our use of freedom. They fashion our moral selves so that we do good, even when no one is looking. Slowly, step by step, we acquire a particular virtue until it becomes our normal way of acting. Slowly we become a virtuous people.

A helpful reflection on virtue can properly be based on the classic definition of the cardinal virtues, something that religious traditions, drawing on Greek philosophy, hold in trust for all. After all, the pursuit of them is a profoundly human quest for those virtues are prudence, courage, justice and temperance and they form the practical basis of our behaviour in the service of society today. (This is taken from the document of the Bishops' Conference: 'Choosing the Common Good', 2010)

Prudence – not a particularly attractive word - is the virtue of right reason in action. It is the opposite of rashness and carelessness; it tempers spontaneity and enables us to discern the good in any circumstance and the right way to achieve it. Prudence is rational and intelligent. But it does not exclude or minimise feelings and emotions. Rather prudence knows how to weigh the meaning and importance of our feelings so that they too become part of the decisions we take.

Courage ensures firmness, and the readiness to stand by what we believe in times of difficulty. Courage is the opposite of opportunism and of evasiveness. Courage is the practice of fortitude in the face of difficulty. It produces heroism in every field. So courage is important in artistic creativity, for example. It helps those who battle against sickness, injustice or depression.

Justice is the virtue by which we strive to give what is due to others by respecting their rights and fulfilling our duties towards them. In this way, justice expands our notion of 'self'. Justice strengthens the ties between us all, especially with those who are most in need. There is also, indeed first of all, justice towards God. This is the virtue of religion, which is fulfilled by our religious practice. And this

aspect of justice frees us from the tyranny of false gods – and there are many – which would claim our attention and worship. Remember G.K.Chesterton's famous phrase: 'When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.'

The fourth virtue is that of temperance. This is the virtue that helps to moderate our appetites and our use of the world's created goods. Temperance is the opposite of consumerism and the uninhibited pursuit of pleasure. Temperance is about learning to desire well. Indeed, temperance is a key part of a happy life.

Now these virtues are what enable each individual human life to flourish. They are also key to the creation of a good society and therefore to the lives of those who sincerely wish to see their life's effort directed to the service of others. The practice of these virtues generates trust between people, and today, as we will recognise, trust is in short supply.

While it may be hoped that the experience of a university education may indeed be a time of the development of such virtues, a further challenge for you is that the university itself exists not only for its own members but also for the broader society in which it is located. Thus, as educators you have a testing but immensely rich vocation – to your own scholars and then to all of us whose health and well-being is so often linked to the serious outcomes of your teaching and research.

Newman reminds us that we are truly ourselves when we live not only for ourselves – that the human person in all his or her complexity should never be reduced to a utilitarian calculus that diminishes our true status as rational moral agents. And this can also be said, to a certain extent, of the university itself and its sense of wider purpose.

c) The Open City

Permit me to illustrate this point by making an obvious remark, although I might now be committing a heresy. Cambridge is more than its university. It is a small city linked over the centuries to its agricultural hinterlands and to its markets. Yet although rooted in its own local economic and geographical context it also has, because of its university, a global significance. Its role, within this city, has far wider significance than its own academic achievements. Now this is something that Cambridge shares with many other great cities around the world, cities also graced with fine universities. I mention those which I have known in my own journeys in life: – Liverpool, Rome, Manchester, Chicago, Birmingham and London.

What unites these diverse places is their sense of being `open cities` – open to new peoples through migration and thus to new ideas that in turn create a rich ferment of culture and enterprise. I saw this vividly in Birmingham, whose many ethnic and religious communities sustained a dynamic civic culture.

This was not without real problems. But one of the mechanisms for negotiating those tensions was a partnership established between the religions, the academy and the civic leadership. One form that this partnership took was a project entitled 'Faiths for the City' and in it Birmingham University played a key part, along with the leaders of Birmingham's religious traditions and its City Council. The broader lesson I drew from that experience is the potential we have when we consciously reach out to those very different to us and allow that otherness to renew our own traditions. That paradoxically is the best basis for rediscovering the values we have in common.

At the start of the 'Faiths in the City' project was an academic study by scholars of the six major faiths as to what elements constituted a 'good city'. Allow me to present just a few highlights of that study, particularly those emerging from the Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions.

Each of these contributions related the construction of a 'good city' to the conscious awareness of God and to the need to act and live in harmony with that awareness and belief. Indeed, all six studies, each in its own way, were united in the conviction expressed by Pope Benedict that the spiritual dimension is fundamental to what we are as human beings.

The Christian perspective, written by Dr Toby Howarth, explored the closeness of the relationship between God and the city. As he put it, in this faith revelation begins in a garden and ends in a city. The

Garden of Eden, in which there was harmony between people and direct intimacy with God, is lost and the angelic guard with flashing sword makes it clear that there is no way back. The only way forward is towards the city. And the promise is constructed as a city, too: the 'new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God' in which there is no temple, 'since the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb were themselves the temple and the city did not need the sun or the moon for light since it was lit by the radiant glory of God.' (Rev 21.22)

In this vision, the presence of God is inseparable from the affairs of the city for the presence of God has taken flesh in the person of Jesus, the Lamb, who even now is the light by which we are to live. Yet the fate of the Lamb, executed on the cross, tells us that the city is full of ambiguity, an ambiguity from which no one is excluded. Thus the task of the faithful citizen is always to pray for the welfare of the city and all its people, for God, in the words of Eugene Peterson, 'is not an occasional tourist to our shores. He has set up habitation here, not as a camper but as a citizen.'

The Jewish perspective, presented by Dr Margaret Jacobi, drew on the story of the city of Sodom and on sections of the Babylonian Talmud. She wrote: 'Sodom, like most cities, is walled with gates. It is therefore a closed society. This means, firstly, that unlike a group in the countryside or the desert, the inhabitants of a walled city can determine who can enter it and meet its inhabitants. Secondly, it means that its inhabitants are crowded together, aware of all their neighbours' doings, for better or worse. They have a tendency to group together and to exclude 'the other', the people who come from outside the city walls. The example of Sodom is a particular warning to city dwellers.'

The lessons of the Talmud, she says, are clear: We learn that wealth is from God. It should not be taken for granted or lead to hubris. It does not belong exclusively to those who own it, but is given on trust and is to be used to help the poor, the stranger and the wayfarer. The 'law of the wayfarer' demanded that the wayfarer be cared for. It was this law that the men of Sodom abandoned.

She wrote that in the city we learn that small actions matter, be they small thefts or small acts of giving. We also learn about justice, that while justice is to be used to protect the vulnerable it can easily be perverted in a city, especially by the powerful; and that justice can be misused even whilst abiding by the law for too strict an application of the law can be harmful to those whom it is designed to protect, especially the stranger and the sojourner who is not a citizen. Compassion is essential in the application of the law. Neglect of these matters damages the city since, for all their arrogance and cruelty, the men of Sodom were ultimately vulnerable. The exclusion of the stranger from Sodom created an atmosphere that was corrosive and full of fear and led to its downfall.

She concluded: 'The good city then, is a city in which thought it may be physically enclosed, is open to the stranger and the wayfarer. It is a city which is built on justice, fairly applied but tempered by compassion. It is a city in which the poor are treated with kindness and generosity. If the inhabitants of the good city do this, they, too, will benefit from a city which is built on trust and mutual benefit.'

The Islamic contribution was presented by Dr Jabal Buaben. In it he presented the Islamic worldview which, centred on the will, desire and design of the One and Only Creator, rejects any bifurcation of the world. Thus he made reference to the principle of Tawhid, the doctrine of the oneness of God, which, in its elaboration, gives room for others to set up their own system within the same environment because the 'authoritative, objective Truth that Muslims believe is upheld in Islam does not blind them to coerce people into submission. In the city, therefore, all its inhabitants enjoy comparable freedoms.' He continued: 'Therefore in a modern city like Birmingham, a Muslim should not have a problem helping to create a united front with all its inhabitants, those of religious faith and those who profess none, in order to build a strong, morally principled and prosperous society.'

The essential elements of these contributions are rich in their implications: an openness to the poor, the foreigner, the vulnerable; a readiness to acknowledge and make space for the variety of experiences of God, and for all who wish to contribute to common well-being; a commitment to and exploration of justice and compassion; a recognition of the importance of our spiritual dimension in an openness to the dependence of our efforts on God and a turning to God in prayer on behalf of all. The task of the project in Birmingham was then to take these overviews inspired by religious belief and apply them to the different sectors of public life: to health provision, to questions of the environment, to housing, to education.

And they apply to wealth creation too, which brings us to another city, the financial city, the world-wide financial market which has such a powerful centre in the City of London.

d) The financial city

Here too the contribution of the reflections of faith and reason together can offer crucial insight and principles for action. This, in my tradition, is well expressed in Catholic Social Teaching, a systematic reflection on the nature and purposes of industry and commerce which has developed and matured over 100 years now.

When the Financial Times runs a series of articles called "Capitalism in Crisis" and political leaders line up to give their prescriptions of how to restore 'responsible capitalism', we can be sure there is something seriously amiss. Research too (the Annual research published last week - the Edelman Trust Barometer) shows a deepening level of mistrust in government and business. During the past year, the number of people expressing confidence in government and business has gone down 8% in one year to just 29% of people expressing such confidence now. There were similar results replicated on a global scale. That growing mistrust is a rational response to the great harm caused to many people by the irresponsibility of some in the financial sector.

Great uncertainty and anxiety are the inevitable consequence of the severe economic winter which is now being experienced by many. But there is perhaps also something deeper: a perception that business has somehow lost its way in a narrow pursuit of profit and personal gain. What we seem to lack is a shared moral framework, and a shared understanding of a common purpose.

Commentators on the financial crisis, including those leading that sector, have pointed out that for some the only questions shaping behaviour are whether what is being done is legal and profitable. This may be the only residue of a lost shared morality just as, for some, the pursuit of profit has become the sole arbiter of business success.

Over the last two years there has been much discussion and debate about the need for reform of the financial sector and the need to rebuild trust. There also remains a deep ambivalence about the private sector more generally with an enduring suspicion that the tendency of business is to exploit people rather than serve them. So many have a deep yearning to see a more morally responsible and socially driven business model that situates business life within the wider frame of promoting the common good and the justice that entails.

This is the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching with its founding principles of the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. It includes the systematic working out of what it means to place the good of the human person at the heart of the social project, from the micro level of personal and family relationships right through to the macro level of social, economic and political relationships and structures, nationally and globally.

In 2009 Pope Benedict wrote 'Caritas in Veritate', which I believe carries an important message to help us all to think creatively and hopefully about the future. A central theme of the encyclical is to call for a "profoundly new way of understanding business enterprise". (n.40) Whilst recognising and accepting the central role of the profit motive and the commercial logic of the market, 'Caritas in Veritate' insists that what happens in commercial and market exchange is always to be shaped and defined by moral and cultural influences.

"Economy and finance as instruments can be used badly when those at the helm are motivated by purely selfish ends....but it is not the instrument that must be called to account but individuals, their moral conscience and their personal and social responsibility...the economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, nor inherently inhuman and opposed to society. It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner." (n.36)

The insistence of this teaching is the need to ensure that the human is the focus of enterprise and commerce. And this is not foreign to those in the financial sector with whom I have discussed these matters at some length. A group of senior financiers, meeting in October 2009, engaged enthusiastically with the challenges in the Papal document. And I was struck by comments from the participants afterwards that this conversation and exchange had been different in kind from those in

which they were normally engaged. The framework and vocabulary - even the moral language itself- gave the opportunity for a more rounded and human-centred discussion. They said to me that it helped them to reframe their own questions and to challenge their own assumptions about the purpose of business and their roles as leaders. The course of these discussions has illustrated how difficult it is to move from words to actions. Change of performance and in particular a change in culture is the acid test. As is clear from the continuing and justifiable public controversy about the financial sector there is still a long way to go. In issues such as the lack of effective accountability and the disconnect between performance outcomes and reward there must be real and evident change before public trust is regained.

My conversations with one Chief Executive of a global company revealed that his priorities, arrived at through business considerations, were very similar to the priorities of 'Caritas in Veritate', arrived at by moral considerations. He spoke of the importance of reducing inequality in society, because it so often lead to political instability which in turn inhibited economic growth. Second, he spoke about family stability, as key to long term social development and the development of new markets. Businesses depend on social capital, the reservoir of trust, legality, and interdependence. From the perspective of the long term success of his business, he was focussing on the human questions which are also at the heart of the concern of the Church.

So the question arises as to how this social capital, which we see being rapidly depleted, can be renewed. Is there in fact a way of bringing closer together concerns which thoughtful business leaders have from the perspective of the long term success of their businesses, with an ethical perspective which focuses on the good of the human person as a foundational goal of that same enterprise?

Here the central insight of 'Caritas in Veritate' can be of help. It is the insistence that ethics is not a constraint on the pursuit of profit, but constitutes part of the goal of the business in serving the common good. Often the question of ethics in business is addressed in terms of Corporate social responsibility - doing good things on the side. The radical challenge of the Encyclical is to propose that the core activities of business can and must themselves be ethical. This invites business leaders and society to re-conceive the framework, and to see profitability not as the goal of business but rather the necessary means through which the moral purposes of business are delivered: the goods or services it provides, the employment it creates, the communities it serves. This demands that ethical considerations should not be thought of as a constraint but a resource. Indeed if increasingly many business environments are no longer a physical interaction with machinery but a meeting of minds, then productivity depends on the level of trust in that environment, and trust depends on ethical behaviour and virtuous people. In services where this contact is diminished, as in financial trading, the demands of this relational aspect of transactions, while not absent, may be more difficult to sustain.

A second idea which the encyclical contains, in its reflections on enterprise and business, is the place it gives to the idea of 'gift' and 'gratutity'. Pope Benedict says that "the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift can and must find their place within normal economic activity. This is a human demand at the present time, but it is also demanded by economic logic".

For our part, we have got used to a highly distorted and attenuated view of commercial relationships. There are those who would insist that there is no room for gratuity in the workplace. On the contrary, when we go to work we should never be expected to leave our humanity at home. The best firms have always known this. And our humanity holds together self-interest and gratuity, and does so more easily when the exchange of business is not thought of as exploitative but creatively commercial. So it is that the satisfaction and reward people get from their work comes at least in part from a sense of the contribution made to the lives of others by the goods or services provided. We have to recognise that the motivations of people vary and that different roles provide different scope for engagement at the human level. The best companies, however, strive to ensure that whatever the job a person has, the dignity of the work they are doing, and its contribution to the business is valued and affirmed.

But a business does not only provide goods and services. It also produces an environment, a culture, which, deliberately or not, influences the kind of people we become. Business cultures help to shape and mound human attitudes and behaviours. We are all subtly formed by our experience at work: by the quality of interaction, how far there is real respect for people and their differences, the way in which creativity is celebrated, how often people are thanked or blamed. This means that the vision and

mission of business as articulated by its leaders can and must be judged more widely than by reference to financial returns alone – it also has a moral value.

Pope Benedict, through the idea of the ethical business and the logic of gift, offers us all a creative way of addressing again the purpose of business which both secures its legitimacy and highlights its core purpose: to serve the common good of humanity.

This is a fine example of the insights of one of the world's great religious beliefs bringing its insight to the service of our contemporary world.

Of course, if engagement with that insight is to take place, then the city cannot remain a closed city. It needs a certain openness at its centre, an openness brought about, perhaps, by crisis but, more creatively, by a recognition that we are not self-creating beings but essentially dependent on each other and on a transcendent dimension which lies beyond our control.

e) Openness to God

The need for such a fundamental openness was directly addressed by Pope Benedict in his address in the German Parliament on 22 September 2011. In a philosophical address, he analysed the consequences of a positivist understanding of both nature and reason in which both are subject entirely to the rules and limitations of science and in which nothing beyond function is recognised as objective. He described the effect of that culture as like 'living in a concrete bunker in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God's wide world.' A closed city indeed. Then he continued: 'And yet we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that even in this artificial world we are still covertly drawing upon God's raw materials, which we refashion into our own products.' Then he made his appeal: 'The windows must be flung open again, we must see with wide world, the sky and the earth once more and learn to make proper use of it.'

His quest for an understanding of the place of the objective within of human nature and the inherent ethical demands of our human nature continued with this question: 'How can nature reassert itself in its true depth, with all its demands, with all its directives?' He continued: 'The importance of ecology is no longer disputed. We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly…Man too has an ecology that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.'

Here, in many ways, is the foundation of all that I have been trying to express this evening. In the construction of the good city, in the pursuit of true virtue, in a correct understanding of enterprise and commerce, there is a need for an openness to the 'other'. The 'other' might come in the person of the stranger, or in a dependence in trust on a trading partner. All of these certainly help to maintain an 'open city'. But fundamentally the 'other' is the transcendent, the reality of God, to whom we are radically open within the spiritual and rational dimension of our beings. The negation of this 'other' and of our dependence on it is leading to a re-shaping of so many of our mores on which further comment could be offered. But the sense of uncertainty that is widely experienced today finds an answer, but not an easy solution, in an acknowledgement of the 'givenness' of so much of our humanity as the work of a Creator, who imbued it with design, beauty and a longing for truth.

Not surprisingly, then, in that address, Pope Benedict alluded to the one gift essential to the ruler, the one gift for which Solomon prayed. It is the gift of a listening heart 'so that he may govern God's people and discern between good and evil.' (1 Kings 3.9) In our public discourse, and in the part in it which the our faiths can play, we need much more of this quality: a listening heart, listening to the deepest longings which bring us into touch with our shared human nature rather than our individuality, into touch with the spiritual realm rather than just the positivism of logic and science, into touch with the Wisdom which is God, the Creator Spirit. This makes of our nature not just an 'is' but also an 'ought', not just an experience but also a command, which, in the tumult of our emotions and efforts, we may find difficult to discern and obey.

The fashioning of a listening heart is a crucial part of our desire to serve society and one to which each of the great religions can make such a significant contribution.

Without a doubt one of the significant features of our times is the profound desire to foster and benefit from genuine dialogue between our religious beliefs and traditions. This desire is shaped not only by the evident need for our society to find a sound ethical basis on which to build, not only the need to generate in society those values which lead to generous, selfless service, but also out of the religious conviction that the one eternal God graces our world in many ways. It is in response to that graciousness, that gratuity, that we, in our turn, offer to each other a warmth and a respect which motivates us to explore together, to study together and together serve the cause of human flourishing. In this work, the Woolf Institute has rightly won wide admiration and regard. May it continue this good work for many years to come.

+Vincent Nichols
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