

## “One People, One World”

Remarks by Philip McDonagh, Director, Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations, Dublin City University at the National Bahá'í Centre on World Religion Day, 15 January 2023

I am honoured by the invitation from Adrian Cristea and the Dublin City Interfaith Forum (DCIF) to address you on World Religion Day. The DCIF was founded in 2012 with a mission to build understanding and cooperation among the different faith communities in Dublin, on this island, and in the world. The establishment of the DCIF was in every way a timely initiative. Here in Ireland, the religious landscape continues to change. The “politics of place” is increasingly seen as part of the future – that is, we are looking at ways of empowering local communities. In both respects – pluralism and localisation – DCIF plays a pathfinding role. DCIF situates its work in a global context and has partners and friends in many other countries. Today, which is World Religion Day, we are reflecting on the theme “One People, One World.” I will focus, therefore, on the on the unity of the nations and the global dimension of interreligious and interfaith dialogue.

I will make four points. First, I will recall that the world religions point us towards the insight that we are one people living in one world. Second, I will argue that religion can help us to “image” or visualise peace. Here, I will draw on the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyib, in 2019. Third, I will discuss new ways of envisaging the relationship between public authorities and faith communities. Fourth and finally, I will suggest that one of the major tasks of our time is to apply our reason to the understanding of political processes.

Here is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah:

I have given him [my servant] my spirit so that he can open up true discernment to all peoples ... Look, I have chosen you ... to be the light of nations, for a salvation that reaches to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:1–2 and 49:6).

The children of Adam had been scattered. But Noah’s rainbow spanned the whole earth, and Isaiah seems to envisage a coming together of the all the peoples of the world.

The life of the Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria spans the eras that we term “BC” and “AD”. In his life of Moses, Philo writes as follows:

[Moses] is a kosmopolitēs, for which reason he is not listed on the citizen-list of any city ... he has received no parcel of land but the whole world as his portion (*Vita Mosis: Life of Moses*, 1.157).

“Kosmopolitēs” is a Stoic term. Greek philosophical schools had begun to question the status of the polis or citizen-state – today, we would refer to the “nation State” – as the primary expression of human community. The Stoics do not withdraw from society. Local forms of citizenship are taken seriously. However, as citizens of the *kosmos*, they have an additional perspective which must always be taken into account in making political decisions. There is a tension between our local allegiances and “the universal dimension of our civic responsibility” (Michel Camdessus<sup>1</sup>). Stoics became political martyrs, especially under the emperor Nero. Many of them died at around the time of the execution of St. Paul and other contemporary followers of the way of Jesus.

I turn now to my second point, concerning the imaging of peace. In 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahamed Al-Tayyib, signed their “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.” The first paragraph reads as follows:

Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity

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<sup>1</sup> See the book *Transformer l’Eglise* published in 2020 by Michel Camdessus and others

by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.

For the Pope and the Grand Imam, fraternity implies a shared existence in which we actively support one another and protect the environment in which we live. In Gandhi's thought, *swaraj* of the least powerful – the self-determination of the poor – is the touchstone, or talisman, of political progress.

Politics always begins in a given context. Therefore, an important part of imaging peace is to understand the historical context in which we are living. Abdul Bahá foresaw in the 19<sup>th</sup> century what has become the central political challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the need to develop a mature conscience that keeps pace with social and scientific change. To quote Abdul Bahá directly:<sup>2</sup>

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pope Benedict based his political theology on a similar vision. Humanity is constantly increasing our productive and destructive capacity without there being an equivalent development in the realm of conscience and mutual understanding. As examples, Pope Benedict uses the development of weapons and emerging sciences that offer the prospect of what we sometimes call “human augmentation.”

Once we accept that we are one people in one world and that we must constantly seek to visualise a pathway to peace, we come inevitably to the role of religions in the public sphere. My third point concerns new ways of envisaging the relationship between public authorities and faith communities. Speaking in April 2021 at the inauguration of the Centre for Religion, Human Values and International Relations at Dublin City University, the Taoiseach (now Tánaiste) Micheál Martin framed the current challenge as follows: “to interpret and apply our

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1. Abdu'l-Bahá. (1982). *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*. Compiled by Howard MacNutt (2d ed.). Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, at 16

high-level values in a world that is changing rapidly and faces many ‘existential’ questions in the realm of climate change and technological developments.” The Taoiseach further stated: “There is important work to be done on the concepts and organisational principles that can encourage a mutually beneficial engagement by political leaders and other stakeholders with religious actors.”

Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the German jurist who passed away in 2019, famously held that the liberal and secular state depends on conditions it cannot itself guarantee.<sup>3</sup>

... every democracy can only be as good as the societal forces that sustain it, and religion can be a crucial resource in sustaining the ethos of the individual, as can be other sources of the self

This thesis is now widely known as the Böckenförde dictum or the Böckenförde paradox. Böckenförde was a Roman Catholic. Another German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, has not, as far as I know, declared any religious faith. Nevertheless, he has conceded that his would-be secular or “post-metaphysical” justification of political rule, is not sustainable in practice. Habermas had argued that open communication and the taking of decisions in common by equal citizens would be a sufficient guarantee of legitimacy, without reference to higher values. What Habermas now acknowledges is that this benign scenario is increasingly contradicted by the operation of market forces. Habermas refers to the “discouraging processes whereby the democratic formation of a common opinion and will loses its functional relevance.” This leads him to the following conclusion:<sup>4</sup>

... the markets and the power of the bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity from more and more spheres of life. Thus it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity ...

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<sup>3</sup> Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, “The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization [1967],” in *Religion, Law, and Democracy: Selected Writings*, ed. Mirjam Künkler and Tine Stein, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 154–67, at 167.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularisation: On Reason and Religion*. Ignatius Press: San Francisco (2006), p. 45

From different starting points, Böckenförde and Habermas arrive at the conclusion that the rule of law depends in the long run on cultural sources that the law itself cannot generate or guarantee. In this perspective, Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides for a structured dialogue between the institutions of the European Union and churches, faith communities, and philosophical organizations. Our Centre at DCU, following a meeting last February involving the churches and faith communities on the island of Ireland, has written to the First Vice-President of the European Parliament with responsibility for dialogue under Article 17 expressing the hope that the European Parliament might undertake specific steps to consolidate this dialogue, in the spirit of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

My fourth and final point is that one of the major tasks of our time, a necessary preamble to practical politics, is to apply our reason to the understanding of political processes. The danger is that the political world will reject, to borrow language from Abdul Bahá, the “coordination of material and spiritual civilization.” There is even a risk that a political system will come to see itself as representing, in and of itself, the highest truth, embracing all other systems of thought. It is therefore important to establish that Abdul Bahá’s vision not only makes sense for religious believers, it is also essential for a coherent understanding of the very nature of politics – of what the French call *le politique*.

Greek thinkers of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, of whom Socrates is the most famous, saw clearly that the granular provisions of established law are an inadequate foundation for life in society, for several inescapable reasons. First, the law is incomplete. Many of our responsibilities are not enforced by our codes of law. Second, lawgivers will not have reckoned with the precise circumstances of every case. This insight is connected with the jurisprudence of equity (*epieikeia*). Third, circumstances are different from one society to another or may change. In times of political upheaval or social disintegration, a citizen’s obligations under the law can become unclear. Do we serve a revolutionary government or an occupying power? How do we define our moral obligations under rapidly changing international circumstances? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, changing global circumstances include the phenomena of climate change, environmental destruction, and all-embracing geopolitical competition.

Of the three 5<sup>th</sup> century ideas I have mentioned, the most decisive for me is the first, namely the possibility that the law as declared will in fact represent a distortion of justice. Pericles in the Funeral Oration and Antigone in the play by Sophocles insist that important limits on conduct are defined by “unwritten laws” (*agrapha nomima*). Similarly, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and the prophets examined concrete regulations, here and now, in the light of the Covenant itself, their faith in the one God whose message is to defend all those who cannot secure justice for themselves.

The greatest historian in the European tradition, Thucydides, considers that a “far-seeing moral patience” (*mellēsis promēthēs*<sup>5</sup>) is a key political virtue. Aristotle pictures a political leader capable of connecting his intimation of “noble and divine things”<sup>6</sup> with particular choices. In other words, the criterion of evaluation for any specific choice is that it should fit within a worldview that is itself independent of day-to-day politics—or perhaps we should say, a worldview that is always in a dialogical relationship with day-to-day politics. The emphasis placed by Thucydides on dialogue and deliberation in each particular case and Aristotle’s description of the relationship between ethos and law are not merely matters of faith. They are also the insights of reason, of sociological and historical literacy.

Applying our reason to the understanding of political processes leads us to searching questions. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis sets out four principles of benign political change :

- Time is more important than space
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- Unity can be achieved in the presence of difference; and
- We must close the gap between ideas and reality

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<sup>5</sup> Thucydides 3.82.4

<sup>6</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, 10.7.1.

John Hume used to argue for more or less the same four lines of approach. For John, peace was process, not the victory of a single point of view. We must respect difference. The reality of “spilling our sweat” should take precedence over abstractions that divide. And for John, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” because the big picture in Europe could make it either easier or more difficult to deal with the particular challenge in Northern Ireland.

How might we apply Pope Francis’s four principles in other situations of conflict, such as the war in Ukraine and other contemporary wars? In our co-authored book, *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy*, we argue that multilateral diplomacy should make room for a dialogue on the great structural questions that arise in every place in every period of history: How does life in society work and why is it important? Are we prepared to suffer for the sake of others? Is there a common life or collective well-being that is more than the sum of our private interests? How does a path for evil open up in human affairs and how does evil spread and metastasize? Where does reconciliation begin?

So far, I have drawn mainly on the Abrahamic religions and European political philosophy. I would like to end by referring briefly to Indian and Chinese traditions of thought. A number of Indian writers,<sup>7</sup> probably a growing number, are suggesting that “liberal” and “progressive” patterns of thought led to injustice under the European empires and have also contributed to today’s ecological crisis. At stake is our understanding of history. Using ancient Roman ideas and the progress of science as their models, colonisers came to believe that favourable patterns of development are brought forth, not in the framework of “one world, one people” and a culture of encounter, but by the decisive actions of an elite fulfilling their destiny. As Mikhail Gorbachev said in the UN General Assembly in 1988, “some people imagine that God made them with a purpose, and that others exist by a mere chance.” Instead of deliberating patiently to achieve the *swaraj* of the least powerful, Europeans and Americans, in this Indian perspective, have often been tempted to intervene in other cultures and geographies bringing a readymade template of their own. According to the Way (*Dao*) of Confucius, leaders are at

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example:

Amartya Sen on “transcendental institutionalism” in *A Theory of Justice* (2010);

Amitabh Ghosh on colonialism and the environment in *The Great Estrangement* (2016);

Priya Satia on 19<sup>th</sup> century British historiography in *Time’s Monster* (2020)

the service of the people in seeking to align current conditions with an ethical, social, and political ideal. A contemporary Chinese scholar, quoted in our book,<sup>8</sup> argues that a “language of virtue, responsibility, and benevolent care,” inspired by Chinese political thought, can enrich the “modern language of freedom, rights, and democracy.”

I end my remarks with the following statement by Pope Benedict, speaking when he was still a Cardinal:<sup>9</sup>

If we are to discuss the basic questions of human existence today, the intercultural dimension seems to me absolutely essential – for such a discussion cannot be carried on exclusively either within the Christian realm or within the Western rational tradition ... De facto, they [Christians and the voices of western secular rationality] are obliged to acknowledge that they are accepted only by parts of mankind, and that they are comprehensible only in parts of mankind ... .”

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<sup>8</sup> *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy*, p. 26

<sup>9</sup> In the dialogue with Jürgen Habermas cited above



