

Are the new forms of religiosity an indication of post-secularisation?

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In parts of the world like Australia, secularist ideology in its various forms has surged with a vengeance in recent times. It is intriguing to ask why this is so. One part of the answer is that secularist ideology has been caught off guard and is rattled by the way religion has made a comeback. Suddenly, it seems, secularist ideology feels under threat in a way it did not expect, and its reaction is to strike back with a certain virulence. A battle which some had thought over – the battle between, shall we say, religion and irreligion – has resumed, with religion doing surprisingly well against an opponent that had perhaps grown complacent. Just when religion looked down and out, it has found a new lease of life. This does not necessarily mean that secularisation is at an end, but it does mean that it has been unsettled in cultures like my own.

Secularist ideology such as I have in mind was largely the product of the Enlightenment, although its roots reach further back in time. It gained momentum through the nineteenth century when it was allied with the forces of rationalism and positivism. It was often enough tied to liberation myths which became had popular and powerful and it consolidated a process of disenchantment which had been going on for some time. The world, it was claimed, and all in it were explicable in ways open to scientific investigation without any reference to the supernatural, to the world of enchantment which human cultures had hitherto taken for granted.

But the forces of religion, the realm of the supernatural and the enchantment it confers are not evaporating quite as some expected. On the

contrary, even in the public domain they are making their presence felt in new ways. In a country like Australia, there are powerful pressures seeking to drive religion into a strictly private domain, since, it is claimed, religion has no place in the public domain. This is often justified as a corollary of the separation of Church and state. Any intrusion of religion into the public domain, it is claimed, would be a violation of that hard-won principle.

Some politicians are perplexed at what is going on; they cannot understand why the religious impulse has re-emerged so powerfully in the public domain, at least in a deeply secular culture such as Australia. It may of course be different in a country like the USA, where religion has always had its part to play in the public domain. But in Australia the religious impulse has been consciously and systematically excluded from the public domain. Religion, it seems most of the time, is rather like the shampoo you use: it is strictly a matter of personal choice and in no way affects public decisions. But that seems to be changing, and the secularist ideologues are accordingly alarmed.

Beyond the public domain, new forms of popular religiosity have emerged as well. This is scarcely less perplexing, given that the power of reason had seemed so close to a total victory over the forces of unreason, that is the forces of religion. In my own Diocese, we have recently had the Journey of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon, and it proved to be a remarkable experience. People of all kinds turned out in great number just to see and touch the Cross and Icon. This was greeted by a certain perplexity; some could not understand why all the fuss and why so many people, young and old, seemed to be so moved. We even took the Cross and Icon into the Federal Parliament and to the Legislative Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory where Canberra lies. Some politicians turned out to greet the symbols, but many were simply puzzled. They struggled to understand why the Cross and Icon were here at all and why someone like myself had invited politicians to join in the celebration. If ever there was a need to demonstrate the power of popular religiosity – understood so

deeply and powerfully by Pope John Paul when he gave the Cross and Icon to the youth of the world – it was celebrations such as these.

The Cross and Icon are utterly simple, but that is part of their power. They go to deep places of the human heart – and not just among Catholic people, as the experience in my own Diocese showed. At each place we visited, the celebration was a combination of a party and a prayer-meeting. The mood was festive, as it usually is with popular religiosity; people had fun. But there was also a deep spirit of prayer, and people were clearly moved by symbols which spoke to them of God's love. This combination of party and prayer has always been central to the religious experience of pilgrimage, which is one of the most enduring forms of popular religiosity.

As I speak, my own Auxiliary Bishop is one of many people on the pilgrim way towards Compostela; and one of the lay members of my Archdiocesan executive team, having made the journey to Compostela, has recently completed a doctoral thesis on the spirituality of pilgrimage. But El Camino is only the best known of many forms of pilgrimage which have made a surprising comeback in recent years.

Beyond the resurgence of interest in pilgrimage, other forms of popular religiosity are having their effect. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal, for instance, has become extraordinarily influential in ways both obvious and less obvious. After the erosion of Catholic devotional life that followed the Second Vatican Council – the virtual disappearance of forms of popular religiosity like the Children of Mary, the Holy Name Society, the Sacred Heart Sodality – many Catholic people were left in a kind of devotional desert where, whatever about the needs of the head, the needs of the heart were left unsatisfied. Into this vacuum there came charismatic spirituality to provide an immediate and all-encompassing experience of the presence and power of the supernatural which popular devotions had always sought to convey.

Some older devotions have emerged in new forms. One example of this is the devotion of the Divine Mercy which traces its origins to the mystical experiences of Saint Faustina Kowalska. It has always seemed to me a latter-day version of the devotion of the Sacred Heart, which traced its origins to the mystical experiences of the Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque. The way it has struck such a deep chord in the Catholic heart is mysterious but unmistakable, and it has surely opened people in a way both new and old to the infinite treasures of the merciful love of Christ.

Another sign of the resurgence of popular religiosity has been the appearance of new forms of Marian devotion associated with places like Medjugorje. These new forms of Marian devotion are often tied to experiences of private revelation which need to be carefully discerned; but they take their place in a deep stream of Catholic devotion which looks back at least to the visionary experiences of Saint Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes one hundred and fifty years ago. The best book that I know on the Lourdes phenomenon is written by the Oxford-based Jewish historian, Ruth Harris. In this sesquicentenary year of Lourdes, I recommend to all here present not only for the light it sheds on the place of Lourdes in the history of the time but for the light it sheds on much of what is happening now and what it might mean for secularisation.

All of these newer forms of popular religiosity are in one way or other a reaction against an excessively cerebral and one-dimensional account of human experience which has had its effect in both the Church and Western culture more generally. Some of what emerged in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council has been too cerebral to satisfy Catholic sensibility. More broadly too there is a reaction against the somewhat joyless and reductive account of human experience found in secularist ideology. There is a desire for re-enchantment after the dis-enchantment produced by such ideology. There is a desire for something which can speak to the whole person and to all persons rather than

something which speaks only to one part of the human person and only to some people, usually the elites of one kind or another.

The Catholic experience of Christianity is always suspicious of elitism, which is why its forms of religiosity are essentially popular. It is always suspicious of what is prim and prohibitive (dare I say the puritanical?), which is why its forms of religiosity tend to have a certain exuberance about them. It is always suspicious of the ways in which contemporary culture can make people feel isolated and impotent, which is why it is essentially communal and why it seeks to make people feel that they are vastly connected and that there is a hope which empowers.

Yet there is a darker side to the resurgence of popular religiosity, with various forms of New Age spirituality and neo-paganism making their presence felt. These provide pseudo-religious experiences with a frisson of the transcendent without any demands being made on the individual. It is religion soft and superficial, ideally suited to a consumerist culture. The Cross is of course the first thing to go, as it can be in the case of popular religiosity in the Catholic Church.

The phenomenon of resurgent popular religiosity needs to be carefully discerned and properly formed if it is not to succumb to its darker side. This is why the experience of the Charismatic Renewal or Catholic Pentecostalism is proving so fruitful in the Church at large. Over a period of time, it has been carefully discerned – thanks in no small measure to Pope John Paul II – and it is also being properly formed. It has been drawn more and more deeply to the heart of the Church where it rightly belongs, when in earlier times there was a danger that it could be pushed to the margin and even out of the Church. If they are to prove a genuine indication of post-secularisation, newer forms of popular religiosity need to be purified and strengthened by the Scripture and the teachings of the Church without losing any of their popular appeal. They need to be imbued more and more deeply with an ecclesial spirit which ensures that

the sense of vast connectedness proper to popular religiosity finds its true home in the Church. They need in one way or another to announce the kerygma, so that they lead to conversion to Christ not just a personal solace which passes quickly, so that people find in them not false hope but the true hope of Easter.

In the end, popular religiosity will prove a genuine indication of post-secularisation insofar as it becomes an experience of encounter with the Risen Christ. Anything less than that may discomfort secularist ideology but will not dislodge it in a way that has to happen if cultures are to do justice to the many dimensions of the human person and the many desires of the human heart.