

A Sermon

Preached  
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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## Civil Rites of Commemoration

'Yea, the sparrow hath found an house' (Psalm 84, v. 3)

This morning, I fear, I shall try to articulate something that is perhaps best left unsaid. However, notwithstanding the anxiety that an H.M. Bateman-like scene awaits the messenger, it strikes me that an academic institution should be able to confront its own home truths. While it might seem obvious why we are here today, it is not so obvious why *WE* are here today. The mixture of gowns and surplices on show on these occasions reminds us very vividly that the Fellows differ in their religious preferences. Moreover, I suspect such trappings also perform a work of concealment, in the politest and most respectful way covering up a lack of religious belief or conventional spiritual commitment.

Why are so many of us here, why do so many of us care about the chapel even when we cannot accept Christianity as truth – at least on its own terms? Christianity's metaphysics – if not its moral code – are beyond many of us. Attendance at evening prayers on a normal term-time Sunday, for example, is often in the low single figures, and even then, it seems, a proportion of those present and participating tend to omit the creed. And, yet, perhaps, many of us have a fondness for this commemoration service, this chapel, and the Church of England in general, that is altogether independent of Anglican adherence, however nominal. I am not suggesting in the slightest that today's congregation constitutes a nest of hypocrites, trimmers, Nicodemites or parishioners of Bray. I detect a warmth rather than a cold hypocrisy. Religion, it has been said, is the warmth at the heart of a civilization, and this is no less true of All Souls than elsewhere. I suspect that in the case of several Fellows there is a warm appreciation of the College chapel and its rites, which is romantic and traditionalist, but does not derive from orthodox, or even heterodox, religious belief.

Nevertheless, a lack of religious belief does not necessarily lead to a secular outlook. There is a world of difference between a David Hume and a Richard Dawkins. A lack of belief need not manifest itself in hostility towards the bulwarks of established religion. Indeed, religious establishments generally provide something of an obstacle to what Hume feared more than superstition, namely an unrestrained and uncontrollable religious enthusiasm. The separation of church and state in the United States provides ample matter for the religious sceptic convinced of the social utility of religious establishments. Establishments, it seems, can confer temporal benefits on society, not least in providing a liberal maintenance for a learned clergy. Is the complete separation of church and state really a better inoculation against religious tyranny than an attenuated Erastian establishment?

After all, there are some ultra-zealous religious denominations which favour secularism in public life, because religion is too precious to have its truths contaminated by contact with the tawdry and sordid compromises of temporal politics. Vice versa, there is no reason why non-believers might not value slender and laodicean religious establishments of the Anglican type, precisely because such churches are responsive to the moderating influences of the surrounding society. Among the ranks of non-believers such external supporters of the Church of England do exist, a discreet and far-from-vocal sub-minority, though not necessarily a sub-minority of those present today.

This sort of ambivalence might well seem hypocritical to a world which seems to prize superficially-obvious sincerity over blurred distinctions between the sacred and the profane. It is alien to our times to make sense of the idea of sceptics and unbelievers gathered in worship, or to make the leap of imagination to perceive the *pietas* which might underpin such a service, albeit not the Christian piety which it ostensibly requires. The Ancients, however, had a more flexible approach to the varying shades of belief and scepticism which might be comprehended within a

less narrowly reified notion of religion. In Cicero's dialogue *De natura deorum*, Cotta, the representative of Academic scepticism is also holder of the civic office of pontifex, which carried responsibility for the administration of religious rites. Cotta offers his view as pontifex that public religious worship ought to be reverently observed; however, he adds that he would like to be persuaded that the gods do indeed exist, for he confesses that sometimes he is perplexed as to whether they exist at all. Scepticism in matters of religion was not, it seems, incompatible with religious office. In 53 B.C. Cicero himself had been appointed to the civic office of augur, with responsibilities for the interpretation of portents and omens. Nevertheless, it is clear from his writings that Cicero was far from convinced that augury served any useful purpose. Indeed, at more than one point in his corpus he cites with apparent approval Cato's satirical surprise that any soothsayer could meet a fellow soothsayer without bursting out laughing. Cicero had some appreciation for the participation of non-believers in religious rites, for he appears to have distinguished 'superstition' – unfounded beliefs about the nature of the gods – from 'religion', which meant in part at least a civic observance of a community's traditional rites. Not that Cicero himself was immune from the force of religious emotion, for he had some kind of intense religious experience following the death of his daughter Tullia. Religion is one of those facets of human experience about which it is prudent not to be reductive.

So what are *we* doing here today – those of us at least who are outside the pale of Christianity? What several of us are participating in today are, in effect, civil rites of commemoration, a communal celebration of our forebears held under the nominal auspices of a Christian religious service. This notion of civil rites of commemoration is far from new, indeed gave rise to one of the greatest controversies of the early modern world. Civil rites of commemoration bulked large in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries for Jesuit missionaries in China. The Jesuits hoped to find some means of accommodating the great truths of Christianity with the noble principles and marked sophistication they detected in Chinese civilization. It seemed possible – likely even – that there was some common ground which Christianity and Confucianism shared. For instance, one school of Jesuit thought, the early eighteenth-century French Figurists, who included Joachim Bouvet and Jean-François Fouquet, thought they could discern Christian truths within the ancient Chinese classics.

The practicalities of accommodation were, however, very controversial. Was it possible to combine traditional Chinese customs with Christian worship? The Jesuit accommodationists were happy to indulge what they perceived as non-religious elements of Chinese culture within their missionary enterprise. However, the Dominicans perceived this over-generous comprehension of alien rites as a heathen adulteration of Christian ritual. For a start there was the problem of the Chinese veneration for Confucius. Was this tantamount to a strain of religious worship or merely the honouring of an ancient philosopher and wise man? Moreover, were Chinese ancestral rites religious in nature or more properly a kind of civil or secular commemoration of one's forebears, simply an honouring of their memory without any religious connotations of worship as such or superstition? Could such ceremonies be absorbed – without damage to the truths of Christian doctrine – within a pragmatic and accommodating Jesuit mission? The Dominicans thought not, and had the rites condemned in 1645. However, Jesuit lobbying in Rome led to the granting of formal approval of the rites in 1656. Confusingly, in 1669 the Holy Office decreed that *both* apparently contradictory documents were binding in their own terms and according to their own particular circumstances. Given this ambiguous and unresolved state of affairs, contemporaries had every incentive to investigate the significance of Chinese memorial rites. Were ancestors simply being honoured as beloved or revered forebears or were they, in fact, being beseeched for favours or blessings of some kind? And what about the wooden tablets which the Chinese kept in their houses as part of this ancestral cult? Were these simply expressions of remembrance and commemoration, or did the Chinese believe that the

souls of the dead resided in the tablets? Obviously, if the latter, this was – as the Dominicans feared – idolatry of the worst sort, and needed to be addressed. The issue came to a head again in 1693 when Charles Maigrot, the vicar apostolic of Fujian, prohibited Christians from participating in rites commemorating Confucius or their ancestors. In 1704 the papacy decided against the Jesuit position on the rites, and this was reinforced by the Nanjing decree of 1707 issued by the papal legate to China, Maillard de Tournon. However, the ideal of accommodation had not expired, and the issue continued to rage, not least as the Chinese emperor himself favoured accommodation. Indeed, the emperor had an Oriental Erastian's dislike of the pretensions of the papacy: how could a faraway holy man have the audacity to tell the emperor, who possessed, of course, his very own heavenly mandate, what kind of religion his subjects could practise? Pope Clement XI sent the more emollient Archbishop Mezzabarba to China as legate in 1720-1 in the hope of resolving the impasse. The conciliatory Mezzabarba granted permission for the performance of Chinese ceremonies concerning the dead whose purported significance was civil rather than supernatural. Yet such was the flux of high politics, both temporal and ecclesiastical, that this endorsement of accommodation proved far from long-lasting. Not only did the new Chinese emperor turn against Christianity, but the Christians too reversed their policy yet again. In 1742 the apostolic constitution *Ex quo singulari* withdrew Mezzabarba's permissions to comprehend supposedly civil acts of commemoration.

Accommodation at All Souls is, of course, a less vexatious and more civilised affair. The chapel does not intrude into the life of the Fellowship nor do the Fellows have an antagonistic relationship towards the chapel, as has sometimes been the case in certain other Oxford colleges. No clerisy patrols the category boundary between religious and civil rites. There is scope for a mixed audience of believers and non-believers to observe rites of commemoration without embarrassment or hypocrisy, indeed with as much emotional commitment on the part of non-believers as on the part of believers. If there is a wider message, and I fear, not a religious one as such, it is that the chapel should continue to play a central role in the life of the College, however removed the Fellows as individuals from the Church of England, or even from Christianity in general. In other words, this is a plea – which will perhaps be unwelcome to some ears, though not to others, I hope – that the College of the future, despite the inevitability of reform from time to time, will not become a sterile and rootless research institute. Rather the College will remain precisely that: a College, retaining an organic connection with its past and its traditions.