

The Spectator Debate – Is Secularism is a greater threat to Christianity than Islam?

by **Esmerelda Weatherwax** (July 2011)

Last year on Armistice Day, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month the Muslims against Crusades burnt the poppies at Kensington Gore outside the Royal Geographical Society building. They were watched by Ernest Shackleton who stood impassively on his niche above.

Last night, Wednesday 29th June 2011, I went to a more civilised event inside the building behind the statue of the Arctic explorer, and his companion round the corner, Dr Livingstone.

It was one of the debates organised regularly by the Spectator. Even non UK readers will have heard of this British magazine on current affairs.

The motion was Secularism is a greater threat to Christianity than Islam. This was not taken down verbatim in shorthand; it is from my longhand notes as full as I could make them, but is not supposed to be a complete transcript.

To speak in favour of the motion were Professor Tariq Ramadan, about whom much has been written here, [The Very Rev'd Patrick Sookhdeo](#) of the Barnabas Fund and [Rod Liddle](#) who is associate editor of the Spectator and a columnist for the Sunday Times.

The auditorium was full but not overcrowded. Some very ladylike young women dressed in elegant black took a preliminary verbal vote of our opinion before we had heard the arguments. Most of the panel took their places and Rod Liddle began his opening remarks and to introduce them. Tariq Ramadan was fashionably late.

Rod Liddle thanked us all for coming tonight and missing the latest episode of The Apprentice to do so. He said "Thanks are due to our sponsors, Brewin Dolphin; I don't know what they do but if you see one, buy it"

He described Damian Thompson as a “very good writer even if he is further to the right than a fish knife” and Douglas Murray as “even outflanking Damian Thompson on the right”.

“And here is Tariq Ramadan” he said, as Ramadan slid into his chair in the nick of time.

The format of the debate was that each speaker would speak for 9 minutes. There would be questions from the floor. One minute each to sum up and then the vote would be announced.

Father Timothy Radcliff began.

He said that the term secularism can be used in a weak sense and a strong sense. In the weak sense the trend is for the exclusion of faith in the public sphere. In the strong or strict sense secularism maintains that the only truth is science, that which can be empirically observed and based on checkable facts

“This I maintain is a threat, not just to Christianity but to all civilisation”. He said that science can answer some questions but not the reason for our human existence, matters such as love and poetry. He said that Christianity has nothing against the secular. Men such as Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great insisted on testing hypotheses. Albert the Great had been told that ostriches ate iron; thereafter he carried a piece of iron in the hope that one day he would meet an ostrich on which to test the assertion.

“Truth is the motto of my order and truth is multi-layered. . . Faith and reason are never incompatible”. He quoted GK Chesterton, that when you stop believing in God you will believe in anything.

Patrick Sookhdeo said that a Christian has nothing to fear from Islam or secularism. The loss of one's faith and one's own soul is the true threat and that comes from within. But for Christianity outside forces can be a threat and those forces in some areas has led to its eradication.

However we must distinguish between beliefs. Secularism is actually a Christian concept, the separation of church and state being given to us by the highest authority when Christ said ‘Render unto Caesar, that which is Caesar’s’. Secular humanism, by contrast, is actively opposed to religion. We must also distinguish Muslim people from the Islamic religion and its diverse streams.

However Islam has been responsible in history for destroying Christianity. He gave details. Arabia having been a pluralist country was, by 644 all Muslim. In his later life Mohammed was *not* friendly towards Christians. Islam is ideologically hostile to Christianity. Damascus,

Jerusalem, Alexandria were all centres of the early church, all fell to Islam. The growth of the Islamic empire was an expansionist drive intrinsic with Islam.

Rules developed which culminated in the development of sharia, ie Islamic law. Christians had the dhimmi, subordinate status; they had to pay the jizya tax, wear special clothes. Sharia lay down the death penalty to all adult male apostates.

Islam is unique among world religions in the pressure it exerts on other faiths. This is because no other religion legislates on such a scale and in such inflexible detail about politics, economics, warfare, and the relative rights of various sections of society.

There have been occasional periods of peaceful coexistence, but usually at times and in places when Christians have accepted their subordinate position under Islam, or when there has been an overarching power, such as the British Empire.

Christians have not fared well under Islam. In recent history he listed the fate of the Balkans, the Armenian genocide of 1915, the destruction of Smyrna in 1922, the Assyrians in 1933, the recent Sudanese Civil war. Post Sadaam Iraq, Christians are deliberately targeted by Islam intending to force the entire community of Christians to leave their homeland. The 'Arab Spring' may herald a 'Christian winter'. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood (*founded by Tariq Ramadan's grandfather – I glanced at him to see what his reaction was – he looked bored*) has sparked a new onslaught on Christians. In Afghanistan the entire new convert church also faces annihilation

He said imagine a Christian woman, labouring in the fields. Her co-workers denounce her for blasphemy against Islam and she is thrown in prison. Imagine that the politician who takes up her case is murdered. The Christian politician, the only one in government, who takes over her case next, is also murdered. She faces the death penalty. That is what has happened to Aasia Bibi right now.

Where is Aasia Bibi safest? Under an Islamic state or a secular one?

Imagine me, a convert from Islam to Christianity? I am a traitor – I should be killed. Where would I prefer to live? In a secular state where the law guarantees me freedom of conscience, freedom to choose or change my faith, and protects me from religious violence? Or in an Islamic state where such fundamental liberties are denied?

He sat down to much applause from the audience and the approval of his peers on the panel. *By this point Tariq Ramadan was looking rather uncomfortable.*

Damian Thompson.

This is a simple question. How does Christianity die? Look at the UK; one of Christianity's dying rooms. Whatever the reason it is fast, efficient and it isn't Islam. Christians have stopped going to church? Why? Is it the music? (This is a perennial theme in his blog, the poverty and banality of much modern music in church) The most ominous words in the language are 'and the next hymn is Shine Jesus Shine'.

It is because of secularism. It cannot sustain an overarching belief. It becomes diffuse, nebulous, and as malleable as a quotation in a Johann Hari article.

Secularism isn't a proper ideology but do not underestimate it. People are frightened of disapproval during discussion over the dinner table; diet is the new religion.

This is not helped by the Catholic bureaucracy. They will not criticise Islam because they will be criticised round the dinner table and accused of racism. Here he also mentioned the cause of a catholic school under threat from church management – not strictly relevant to the matter of secularism and Islam but a cause dear to his heart. Islam is in danger from pluralism. I do not underestimate the danger of Islam. I am afraid of Islam's violent tendency. We don't hear enough about Islamic persecution of Christians due to secular spinelessness and multiculturalism. Thank God for Patrick Sookhdeo and Douglas Murray for drawing our attention to these. But of the two secularism is worse.

Nick Cohen

I want to argue against hard secularism, and say that 'soft' secularism is not really that soft. Our opponents are defining it. I take what Damian said seriously. He read out the classic secular argument of Thomas Jefferson in the bill laid before the general Assembly of Virginia.

[here](#).

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