

Kenneth Houston

Open Letter to Tony Blair

PO Box 60519,
London,
W2 7JU,
United Kingdom



Rowantrees,
Carn High,
Ramelton,
Co. Donegal,
Rep of Ireland,
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Dear Mr Blair,

FEEL COMPELLED to write to you in view of comments you made recently at the *Common Word* conference of Christian and Muslim groups at Georgetown University. My concern rests with the intersection of two things: the job you aspire to in Europe, and your personal faith.

It is not uncommon among non-believers, and especially for critics of faith based politics, to establish some distance between ‘moderates’ and certain perspectives that have recently become prominent in the debate around religion, such as those expressed by the so-called ‘New Atheists’ like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and others. So effective has been the theists’ strategy of lumping atheists together with religious extremists that denigrating the ‘New Atheists’ has itself become a cottage industry.

I will not create such a distance between myself and these individuals, for I believe that these authors and others like them have made important points that have been too readily dismissed by ‘people of faith’. In fact, my purpose in writing is to challenge some of the underlying assumptions that came through in your recent speech, and these relate directly to the authors I mention above.

In your Georgetown University speech (7th October) you make the point that: “*We [people of faith] face an aggressive secular attack from without. We face the threat of extremism from within*”. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to utter such a remark. But let me say first, Mr Blair, that there is something profoundly perverse about your willingness to equate non-believers who question – and even mock – religious authority and belief with those believers who carry out the worst forms of cruelty and violence. There is, obviously, a strategic purpose behind such a rhetorical act: foster a siege mentality among ‘mainstream’ and ‘moderate’ believers so that they may unite more robustly in defence of their way of thinking. It is nothing more than an attempt to unite ‘people of faith’ against a constructed combined enemy of fanaticism and scepticism. ‘Right-thinking’, people, in your view, are not the ‘fanatics’ who fly planes into buildings, detonate waistcoats packed with plastic explosives or demand that churches and faith organisations stay out of politics. Yet something in this assumption grates.

Another common refrain, expressed in your Georgetown speech and elsewhere, is that faith equates to hope while unbelief equates to hopelessness, at least for people of faith. Your much vaunted policy of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘respect for diversity’ – all catchwords of contemporary political thought and praxis – obviously fails to include those who dissent from your positive evaluation of religion and faith. We might feel heartened that you deplore those who murder for their beliefs, but in your mischaracterisation of secularism and its advocates

you reveal a patent unwillingness to confront the real problem with religion. The problem is that the current vogue for ‘inter-faith’ dialogue has been sustained by unwarranted attacks on secularism and its advocates, a desperate tactic of ‘atheist-bashing’ to form a common bond with rival religions. Fair enough, Mr Blair, give it your best shot. We’re certainly up to the challenge.

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It is disappointing that, in the third millennium, secularism has been so cynically maligned and mischaracterised by ‘people of faith’. For you, secularism has become an inconvenience to the holy grail of faith-based politics. That is a dangerous premise from which to operate. If one were to accept uncritically the propaganda of senior religious clergy and their numerous defenders, then we might conclude that Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and others are closet National Socialists or Stalinists in waiting, ready to establish a moral order that would automatically lead to the gulags and the gas chambers. More non-belief in our society, according to the faithful, equates to moral degradation, loss of social cohesion and an increase in social dysfunction. There is no attempt to acknowledge or recognise the intrinsic liberal democratic credentials of secularist advocates, their sense of social justice, and their demand for equal rights for all – without exception.

There is even less inclination to base these apocalyptic claims on evidence. It must surely upset the ‘people of faith’ to learn that the least religious societies in the world are the least dysfunctional. Instead, the secularist conviction that religion should be held at arm’s length from social organisation and politics is portrayed as a fanatical, closed-minded intolerance, comparable to those god-fearing servants who blow up girl’s schools, murder teachers and slit the throats of Westerners. The painful lessons of modern European history have been conveniently ignored by ‘people of faith’. There is no admission that the ‘New Atheists’ and the many secularists – both individually and through various organisations – who strive for a fairer society are merely pushing back against the entrenched privileges held by religious groups and institutions in many advanced democratic states. There is no effort by you or others of ‘faith’ to engage with secularist concerns about the ↪

intrinsically flawed premises underpinning the notion of religiously segregated schooling, which you have vigorously promoted in the UK.

The real issue here, Mr Blair, is that the religious sense of pomposity, self importance, entitlement, along with unreflective respect extended to devout believers by the political elite, has at last been faced head on by thoughtful and articulate commentators. It is about time that this happened, it is far from finished, and it is entirely legitimate. What you and other 'people of faith' fear is not simply what these authors say, or what these secular associations stand for, but that people are starting to listen.

Yet those who seek a more just – and secular – society face equally difficult challenges. We must fight against deep structural biases, even within modern democratic societies, which favour religion. We face politicians who, like you, consistently demonstrate a partisan attitude towards anyone with the title of Bishop, Cardinal, Imam or Pope before their name. Our task is not helped by the persistent and uncritical connection between religion and morality. When 'people of faith' make this link between their belief in a god and proper moral conduct they infer, consciously or not, that those without such beliefs are immoral, or at least amoral.

If the last decade has shown us anything, Mr Blair, it is that faith does not guarantee moral conduct. Let us, for the sake of brevity, set aside the events of 2001, when 'people of faith' flew passenger jets into places of work in New York. Let us, for now, set aside the god-fearing, bible-reading Mr Bush, who marched his god-fearing, bible-reading nation into two disastrous wars, rendition flights, 'stress positions' for 'detainees' in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and oversaw a corporate culture that sustained the greed and avarice so often deplored by those who preach from the 'good book'. We'll suspend, for now, our disgust at the attitude of the world's foremost religious institution, which perversely tends the Aids-stricken of Africa while finger-wagging about the use of barrier contraception – as though it is up to ageing celibate elites in Europe to determine the 'appropriate' sexual activity of Africans.

Let's instead move a little closer to home. My home. Ireland. A country blessed, you might say, with strong faith, Catholic roots and tradition. Yes, well this little nation has had the recent dishonour of publishing the most damning report on systematic human rights abuses to emerge from any peacetime nation in Europe. All perpetrated by clergy. All covered up by clergy. And the subsequent pursuit of justice was persistently obstructed by litigiously savvy clergy. 'People of faith' did that, Mr Blair. People, not alone brought up in a strongly religious country, whose laws and institutions revolved around the Holy Trinity, but people who were actually trained as religious professionals. All that training, all that piety, all that faith, such intricate knowledge of the catechism and sacraments, the doctrines – but it produced no one capable of acting on their nagging consciences at the sound of children being beaten and raped by the servants of God... for decades. Decades, Mr Blair.

You refuse to recognise that justifying a role for religion in politics and society through an appeal to improving moral conduct harbours precisely that central flaw that leads to all these violations of human dignity. It establishes structures of authority and domination that are precluded from challenge, it entrenches the rule of some over the spiritual lives of many without question. 'Respect' for religion has become the new form of censorship.

The idea of a divine guarantee of human dignity brings something less savoury to the table of human morality. The trouble with religion is that when humanity is defined in religious terms it invariably returns to that old chestnut: us and

them. Religions, especially the 'great' religions, invariably divide humanity up into enclaves and categories. You may disagree. Somewhere within your more 'inter-faith' philosophy you may think that all religions guarantee the same thing: human dignity and respect. I'm afraid they don't. To paraphrase Orwell (who'd have a thing or two to say about where you've led Britain), some are accorded more dignity than others by the 'great' faiths. I don't need to list those categories of humanity defined by religious doctrines. You know them well enough, though you won't admit it.

Consider the case of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Ah, yes, Mr Houston, but it's not Islamic, I hear you cry. True. I agree. The Qur'an does not explicitly advocate slicing the genitals of pre-pubescent girls. But can you explain to me why it has taken until very recently for the pious Islamic scholars at Al Azhar to declare FGM incompatible with Islam? Why have the holy men of Islam and leaders of prayer in the majority Muslim countries where it is practised failed to definitively and vigorously outlaw this heinous and disgusting violation of young girls? One wonders why it takes the much maligned standards of Western-inspired human rights to throw into relief these deficiencies in religious morality. It brings to mind a remark made by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault: 'Fathers have only to mistake effects for causes, believe in the reality of an 'afterlife', and maintain the value of eternal truths, and the bodies of their children will suffer'. Indeed.

You see, Mr Blair, the trouble with linking religion and morality is the significant absence of morality even – or especially – when religion gets a free hand. Mercifully, the people of Iran are starting to wake up to this. We, and by 'we' I mean secularists, do not seek to convert you to atheism, a baseless fear promoted by 'people of faith' to obscure debate. Instead we seek to prevent the insidious intrusion of superstition into politics, so that no one need fear domination by self appointed 'faith leaders'. We do not fear faith. We fear faith through legislation, through policy. We fear that, increasingly, citizens of nation states are being defined by faith. By categorising and classifying children into 'faith schools', as you did in the UK, you made the same mistake that was made in Ireland several generations ago. You have not learned the lessons of the very conflict you worked so hard to resolve. It is not that priests or clergy delivered fiery remarks at student assembly, prompting young Northern Irish children to become proficient at using assault rifles and semtex. Rather, it is the persistence of a societal division through the education of children in separate religious schools. Let's set aside the mounting evidence that integrated schooling actually reduces sectarian attitudes among young people. It is the structurally present distinction between 'us' and 'them' that is the real problem.

Mr Blair, I am glad Europe's leaders did not grant you the role of European Council President. Your remarks, indeed your political career to date, offered me no guarantee that you would be sympathetic to the nearly one fifth of Europe's populace who declare themselves 'non religious'. Those of us who want to be free of religiously inspired politics can find no comfort in the idea of your holding such a prominent role. Secular humanists and 'people of faith' will forever disagree about the nature of our universe and the role of humanity in it. The problem between us does not lie in our abstract disagreements. However, when you bring your faith into legislation, politics and policy, or the reform of it, you need to realise that you are fair game for any vigorous secular critique. If you believe that 'people of faith' are, or should be, above such criticism, then you are woefully naive.

Yours,
Kenneth Houston