

**ADDRESS BY MONSIGNOR MATTHEW DICKENS AT THE FIRIST OPEN
FORUM DISCUSSION OF THE CATHOLIC SOCIETY, CANTERBURY
CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY ON 25th APRIL 2015**

Should faith play a role in politics?

Firstly, I would like to thank Rob Gainey, Roxy Albert and Fr Valentine Erhahon for inviting me to take part in this Open Forum. I am honoured to be here.

I have something of a sense of *deja vu* this evening. I first walked round these buildings when I was eight years old, probably in my primary school shorts. My father was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in education here in 1969, and worked here until his retirement in 1986.

Since then I have graduated...into long trousers, I have become a Catholic and a priest, and as Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Southwark I am responsible to Archbishop Peter Smith for the administration of the Diocese which covers all the London boroughs south of the Thames, the county of Kent and the Medway Towns Unitary Authority.

In the Archdiocese of Southwark, we have 180 parishes, 127 primary schools, 32 secondary schools, 4 sixth-form colleges, 9 independent schools and one university (Roehampton). The latest figures available indicate that on the Sundays of October 2013, 90,430 people attended Mass in the Archdiocese.

I give you those statistics because the first thing I want to say in that religious faith, both at a personal level and as an institutional entity, remains a highly significant reality in the life of our country. And I have only spoken about the Catholic Church in one diocese. In the 2011 census, 67.1% of respondents identified themselves as religious, while 25.7% said they had no religion and 7.2% declined to answer the question.

What is the nature of religious faith? Religion, of whatever tradition, is, of course, a personal thing. For those who profess religious faith, it fundamentally shapes our understanding of good and evil, of right and wrong.

But while religion is always personal, it is never private. Religious faith always has a community dimension and draws one into relationship with others. For Christians and for many others of other faith traditions, religion is a motivating force to work for peace, justice and reconciliation. So in the sense of religion being a factor in the relationship of peoples, religion is of its nature political.

So in my view, the desire of some to move religious belief out of the public debate (to make religion little more than a private activity) is profoundly to misunderstand the nature of religious faith.

I would like to give two examples of the contribution of the religious 'lobby' to political life:

Firstly, the International Conference on Human Trafficking held in the Vatican in December 2014. This was organised by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales with the Metropolitan Police and the Home Office and was attended by Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and Theresa May, the Home Secretary. The purpose of the Conference was to explore ways in which the Church, government and

the security services can work together to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our world from exploitation.

Secondly, the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life has been convened this year by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, and is chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss. Its brief is to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain and to explore how shared understandings of the common good may contribute to a more harmonious British society.

These are just two examples of how religious faith, and the institutions of religion, do in fact play a significant role in international and national politics. This will not happen if religious faith is, as it were, screened out of the political life of our country.

What is the nature of politics? Political systems of course come in many forms. Some of the worst atrocities of history have emerged through corrupt and debased political systems which have lost any true sense of the dignity and value of the human person.

Our tradition of liberal democracy has taken centuries to develop and it will go on developing. The significance of the British system as a model for democracy throughout the world is incalculable.

Fundamental to the politics of democracy is the legitimate diversity of religious, ethical and political opinion. Democracy is the system where beliefs and opinions can be exchanged, challenged and defended. Every individual and every association of people – whether religious or secular – has the democratic right to participate actively in the political process. And indeed from the Catholic perspective, we have a duty to take part in the national debate.

So should faith play a part in politics? My argument is that because faith continues to be a powerful motivational force for millions of people in our country – from all religious traditions – religious faith is part of the Body Politic– it is part of the society in which we live. As such it cannot be screened out of political life, nor can it be properly seen as simply a private activity.

My desire is that religious groups and more deeply integrated into our political life, not less. I believe it is profoundly dangerous to alienate people from the political process simply because they profess a religious faith. This is undemocratic and risks feeding those who wish to undermine the good will that in general marks our multi-cultural society.

I am a Catholic priest and I hope, by the mercy of God, I shall die one. But I would like to see a House of Commons – and a House of Lords - peopled with atheists, agnostics, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, Christians – in other words the whole gamut of our wonderfully diverse British culture. This is true democracy, and we must defend the right of every person to be part of it.