THE SEVERN FORUM

‘Where can Wisdom be found?’

The Church and the Media

by

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Aunt Dot and the BBC

"'TAKE MY CAMEL DEAR" said my Aunt Dot as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.' Some of you will recognise the beginning of Rose MacCauley's famous novel about travel, the church and forbidden love: *The Towers of Trebizond*.

This was a book which affected me very much in my teens and early twenties – and it was in my early twenties, having left Cambridge with a degree in theology, that I started work at the BBC at Langham Place in London, just round the corner from All Saints Margaret Street (where Aunt Dot had her camel tethered – this was before the introduction of parking meters – while she attended Mass). At that stage in my life I felt called to spread the Gospel, and, having jumped the evangelical ship over the issue of Biblical criticism, I shared with the fictional Aunt Dot a delight in Anglo-Catholic worship. In fact I almost believed, like her, that if the BBC were to broadcast High Mass every Sunday from an Anglo Catholic shrine like All Saints Margaret Street the nation would be converted overnight.

I start there because the media, and in particular radio was for me what is called in religious life 'first formation' – it was my first job, I started in 1972, it was my first real responsibility, my first testing of vocation against reality. I was aware of feeling extremely privileged to be working in religious broadcasting in what felt like the heart of the BBC.

There was a big department of religious producers in 1972 with a weekly programme of talks, services, music programmes and documentaries; a surprising number of which have survived to today: *Prayer for the Day, Thought for the Day, Pause for Thought, Sunday,* the *Daily Service, Choral Evensong*. There was also an Evening Service on a *Lighten Our Darkness*, now extinct. At the time we were working within the framework given by a policy paper called Broadcasting in the 70s which has spelt the end of the old Home Service Light Programme and Third Programme arrangement by splitting the popular channel into two. So we now had Radio 1, 2, 3 and 4 with their distinctive target audiences.

And it occurred to me then, though I think my colleagues thought I was rather mad to suggest this; that those four radio channels were distinct not only in programme styles and content; but also in their implicit or underlying theology – where God was to be found.

'Doing God' on radio

Radio 1 didn't really do God at all. But it did have *Speakeasy*, which was meant to be a kind of ethical discussion for the teens and twenties, and referred to God and religion from time to time. It was presented by the now notorious Jimmy Saville. Radio 2 on the other hand was the voice of informal worship, implicit faith, a platform for Christian celebrities, an approach to faith which was affective rather than cerebral. There was a strong sense of tradition on Radio 2, but the tone was light after all, this had been the channel of *Music While You Work*. Radio 2 also had a Sunday morning service which was called *The People's Service*, and that title tells you a lot – that there was a class structure to the way broadcasting was organised. Today Radio 2 has the *Sunday Hour* and *Good Morning Sunday*.

Radio 4 was as it is now the voice of the middle classes, articulate, humorous, factual, speech based, journalistic. This was the home of the Sunday programmes, of structured Sunday worship, of *Thought for the Day* and of all kinds of earnest talks and discussions. I think it got more attention than the other channels because those of us who worked for the religious department of the BBC were al really Radio 4 people. Radio 3 was for the intellectual and musical elite; serious music lovers whose diet of concerts and recorded music was interspersed with talks and occasional documentaries. Not much to do with God there, though *Choral Evensong* had its home there as it still does, and of course sacred music was

frequently on offer. But my instinct about 'different theologies' being reflected in the different four mainstream radio channels was also, though I didn't realise it at the time, an instinct about different cultures playing out through the media. These different cultures are partly, though not wholly about class. They are also about old and young, north and south, city and country and about who you belong to and identify with. 1n 1990 the four would be supplemented by Radio 5, or 5 live as it came to be after its relaunch in 1995. And this was a reflection of another style or culture of broadcasting; the result of the proliferation of channels that were now available and a style which had grown up through local radio. Sport, news, phone-ins, informality and immediacy. A younger profile who would soon be amplifying their media choices with smart phones and tablets.

Still, even in the days when I worked for the BBC, at least at the beginning of that period in the later 1970s and early 80s we spoke about broadcasting – which we contrasted with what we called narrowcasting. Broadcasting was what the BBC did. Nation speaks truth unto nation. We believed we talked to everyone; even if not always in quite the same tone of voice. Narrowcasting was not for us. But this would change. With the proliferation of new media outlets following the deregulation policies in the late 1980s narrowcasting was reconceived as niche broadcasting and became something to be developed rather than avoided. The arrival of the internet would seen mean that whatever your interests, whether geeky, eccentric or potentially illegal you will easily be able to find others who share it.

Public Christianity

The BBC I joined had long been committed to broadcast worship and to religious comment. It employed ministers of the major denominations to produce these faith-based programmes. It was ecumenical in outlook, determined that its efforts in the area of religion should not be bogged down by denominational differences. In this it was really remarkably successful. A daily broadcast act of worship, the *Daily Service*, had its own liturgical book. It was more formally liturgical than some Non-Conformists found comfortable and less so than many Anglicans were familiar with. It helped to generate the idea (which was also helped by patterns of school worship as prescribed by the 1944 education Act) that the four nations of the United Kingdom were Christian in a way which went beyond denominational divisions. It did, however, exclude those whose orthodoxy was thought of as sub-standard: Christian scientists, Jehovah' Witnesses and so forth.

The arrangement was far from perfect. But it did work for a time and helped to foster the view that there was such a thing as public Christianity made up from, but also independent of, official church bodies. This public Christianity was based on adherence to the scriptures; with a strongly ethical and exemplarist emphasis (rather than a dogmatic or sacramental one). The successors to the *Daily Service* were a whole range of musical and devotional programmes on Radio and Television, the most successful and lasting of which has been Songs of Praise.

Cultural Christianity

The BBC had a key place in preserving a kind of cultural Christianity through the 1960s and 70s. It was therefore still possible at that time to describe British society as Christian; Christian here meaning historically, ethically and in terms of very broad belief. Programme controllers did not always like this consensus, but in general they accepted it. There was room for spiritually minded agnostics and liberal minded Jews; David Kossoff, with his retelling of Bible stories, Hugo Gryn and Lionel Blue as contributors to Thought for the Day and other programmes.

These programmes were accepted as part of the deal by the Channel Controllers, but it was not without resentment and internal criticism. *Thought for the Day* in particular, was simply hated by the editors of the *Today* programme. One senior managed arranged for an audience survey of the components of *Today* in the confidence that there would be a mass call for the abolition of *Thought for the Day*, only to find that it was one of the most popular items. For what it is worth, *Thought for the Day* is more accepted and even respected by the BBC's hierarchy today than it was when I produced it in the 1970s. But whereas then it was often rather preachy and perhaps did make assumptions about the superiority of the Christian way over any other; today it is seen much more as a tapping into the roots and sources of wisdom from the various faith traditions represented in these islands.

Cultural Divisions and Radio

The BBCs mainstream channels have changed quite a bit over the years and of course they have been supplemented by other commercial and BBC channels and impacted by the astonishing growth of social media. But at times the differences between them are very revealing of the class and cultural divisions in British society.

It was extremely wise of Gordon Reece, who advised Mrs Thatcher, to pitch her appeal through Jimmy Young and Radio 2 rather than to try to make her case on Radio 4. The Radio 4 world was not quite ready to believe in Mrs Thatcher. When she won again in 1983 my colleagues simply could not believe it. They were, of course, Radio 4 types, representatives of what has come to be called the liberal elite. One of them had campaigned for days in Tower Hamlets and came to work in tears.

Listening to Radio 4 in the run up to the Referendum on EU membership you would not have thought Brexit was imminent. The Radio 2 broadcaster Jeremy Vine was much more aware that his audience were sympathetic to leaving the EU. Stuck within our cultural boxes we do not always realise what is going on.

Media Saturation – Stories from Everywhere and Nowhere

Media plays a big part in our sense of the world and how we construct a world of meaning for ourselves. Now if you talk to someone who works in media what they will tell you is that the media reflect society in all its diversity. They believe in the objectivity of media and a commitment to truth. They simply report or reflect what is out there. This is true, I think, but it is not the whole truth. The media are what they say 'media' – they go between what happens and what is received. And in the process inevitably they both simplify and amplify. They act as an editor and as a megaphone.

As an editor because, given the 24 hour news cycle, there is so much material coming in all the time that they have to give shape to. So some material is prioritised, some is put on the back burner, some is ignored. Once we start realising that there are audiences, rather than an audience, we choose what interests them, we angle our questions to reflect their concerns and interpret the answers we get in the light of their concerns. The shape is determined by the expectations of the audience or readership. So local news is not national news and national news filters into local news when it has a local angle or frame of reference. National news will ignore aspects of a story which most impacts locally; local news will highlight precisely these.

We use the word 'story'. This is because news is inevitably angled. There is no such thing as 'straight' news. Establishing facts is always more complicated than we might like to assume. But even if we could – the point here is that we are constantly selecting which facts are to be given prominence and how they are interpreted. It is instructive sometimes to

receive the daily news from an unfamiliar source: Al Jazeera for example, which shares many of the journalistic values of the BBC and other familiar media, but simply selects differently to meet the concerns of its audiences.

All this is very obvious. But I want to expand what I said about the way the relentlessness of the 24 hour news cycle, backed up as it is now, by social media, produces an enormous amount of material. The cycle has to be fed, and of course, and it is perfectly true that there is always something happening somewhere which is of interest to someone. And media are available to people with interests that are not always in the public interest as we have discovered with trolling, online bullying and terrorist recruitment. The media are a megaphone for the discontented, and the potential violent. But they also link us in positive ways. Think of the power of MUMSNET to mobilise opinion and concern. Or in small scale way I think of a Facebook group of very elderly and housebound people living in Milton Keynes and how it is lifeline of mutual support, and even what we now call empowerment. To be able to post on Facebook is to still be a person with opinions and preferences and ideas and creativity.

Good News Is Not News

So media brings us into ever closer and more varied contact with one another, both locally and with those in different parts of the world, to conflict and to violence, to new discoveries and achievements. It brings into prominence those things which, without the relentlessness of the 24 hour news cycle might otherwise have remained obscure. You will be aware of how in the summer when many of the people like politicians whose activities make the news are away, the news goes through a 'silly season' with daft stories making it onto the front page which would never have made it at other times of year.

The downside of this enormous volume of information, and the way it is ruthlessly selected and channelled into the newspapers, tv, radio and online outlets is that it is easy for us to get the impression that the state of the world is absolutely terrible and on the edge of perpetual crisis. Good news is not news. The fact that some trains run on time, that the vast, vast majority of aeroplanes take off and land safely; that you are extremely unlikely to be caught up in a terrorist incident, none of this is news. And the slightly hysterical edge that the news media cultivates works its way into social media; to the trumpet tone of tweets and Facebook entries: Now, here, me.

News matters. It matters to politicians, to those who live and work in state institutions, to those in the professions and in private business and industry to all who pay tax and to all who receive benefits, to the church, to schools and hospitals, to families. We do not want to live in a world where good news is manufactured as it was so often in Soviet Union and in Mao's China: you know: 'The people's collective of x has once again exceeded its production targets etc'. Oppressive regimes always want to control the press, and their fall often follows the moment when people stop believing what they are fed by the media.

So a free press, however awkward it may be from time to time, is a defence against the control of the media by the powerful, or by the establishment, whoever they may be. The paradox is that it leaves it up to us to decide whose voices we trust. And once we have made that decision we tend to stay with it – and so we receive our view of what is going on through the filters that we are ourselves have chosen. We choose our story tellers, who have already selected the stories we enjoy and which reflect our view of the world. And this always involves a certain narrowing of vision.

Windows And Mirrors

A producer I worked with for many years told me that he decided to leave television and take up landscape gardening when he came to the conclusion that television was no longer functioning as a window but as a mirror. In its early days, as he saw it, television had opened up the world to people. There was less choice of course, but arguably, more genuine variety; you could be surprised by that was on television, an evening's viewing would contain things you might not otherwise have though to watch. But now the choice prevents surprise. It limits learning. You choose what has already been made with you in mind, you, your interests, your preferences, your prejudices. You tailor-make your world to confirm what you already believe about it. This is the origin of the interesting disputes there have been recently about 'fake news'. News is not so often faked, rather it is always heavily selected.

So far so obvious. The problem comes though when there is an urgent need to find consensus, to state or restate common or shared values. This is where politicians struggle in democracies like our own. So much of their public utterance is based on distinguishing themselves from their political rivals that they find it difficult to know what to base any call to unity on.

Christianity And The Sourcing Of Our Values

On the 799th anniversary of Magna Carta in 2014 David Cameron attempted to define British values as 'a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law' – these, he said, were 'as British as the union flag, football and fish and chips'. He made a passing reference to the history and traditions that anchors these values and a smaller reference to the role of churches and faith communities in keeping them in currency. But history and faith were played down.

And this is where the question of faith becomes controversial. A recent Social Attitudes Survey suggests that the majority of British people now are not religious. There are fewer people who believe in God than don't. This will mean that the argument that the voice of faith communities should have no part in public life will only be put more strongly. Faith should be a purely private matter with the public landscape being characterised by secular neutrality.

What is going on here is not just that fewer people are going to Church than they did when I worked for the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s; it is also that Christianity is simply less available to people, less known as a source of cultural reference. I can't quite remember when it was when a comedy programme on television had performers singing the Highway Code to an Anglican psalm chant; the joke would be incomprehensible today.

I remember John Major going on television at the start of the first Gulf War and ending his address to the nation with the words 'God Bless…' No one would do that now. And then there is Margaret Thatcher, with her exposition of the parable of Good Samaritan, to make the point that the exercise of the Samaritan's compassion would have been impossible if he had not had money.

More importantly the decline of the Christian faith in our time has mean that there is a growing and genuine uncertainty about the source of our values. David Cameron often emphasised that we were still in some sense a Christian society, but he never sounded very sure about it, or even enthusiastic about it. He described himself as an FM Christian – his spiritual antennae sometimes picked it up and he sometimes didn't. It is something of a public-relations disaster for a politician to 'do God' – journalists are content to describe Mrs May as a vicar's daughter, but there is rather less about the fact that she attends the 8 o clock on every Sunday that she is at home and serves on the coffee rota. To be religious is often

taken to be un-inclusive and less than ideally committed to diversity. The assumption is, by many in the media and in other places of influence that only a robust secular neutrality can broker the interests of faith groups which are assumed to be hostile to one another in competition. But secular neutrality is not as robust as it seems, nor is it as neutral as it appears. The non Christian faith communities tend to be more suspicious of secularism than they are of Christianity. They can see advantages in the weak establishment which maintains a place for Christian faith in public life through the monarchy and the established church and even bishops on the house of Lords.

The Search For Wisdom And The Contribution Of Church Schools

The wider question is I think what are the sources of wisdom in this diverse society and complicated time and who channels it? There has been some useful thinking about this in the last eighteen months or so by those who are trying to map out a future for Church of England schools. Church schools, all faith schools in fact are frequently under attack in the media for perpetuating divisions in society, even by the more extreme, for the brainwashing and abuse of children.

In fact Church schools remain popular with parents and produce good results. Most of them as you know, do not only take those of their own denomination. Some are genuine community schools, open to all. Those responsible for their governance have to tread a delicate line between keeping faith with the faith that inspired their creation while being scrupulously fair and even handed in the education they deliver. It may sound like a tightrope but it is not as tortuous as it may sound. The Church of England has a long history of learning the arts of tolerance and fairness. After all it started out in the 16th century as the English equivalent of the Taliban and has morphed over centuries into an institution which is more much more diverse and tolerant, than its zealous founders could have imagined. Sometimes it is even capable of wisdom.

The C of E recently produced a vision for education in a document entitled *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*. It proposes the word Wisdom as a word which, it says, ought to be used more in discussing the purposes of education. It is an important proposal. Wisdom is not a word we often find used in an educational context or in a political or cultural context. We don't use it much in thinking about institutions or in what we expect from the professionals who advise us.

And that is a pity because I think wisdom is a rather a good word for something which society desperately needs in education, media and in our common life in general.

Good Word, Wisdom

Wisdom is an important concept in all faith traditions, and also I think in the humanism that goes back to the ancient classical world and was revived in the west at the Renaissance. Wisdom is a word which has roots in both faith and in humanistic philosophy. It is a word which could bring together the virtues and values of the faith traditions with virtues and values deprived from other humanist and secular sources.

In the Bible, and to a large extent in ancient philosophy Wisdom permeates all things in heaven and earth. It is order and beauty in nature and in the cosmos. It is reflected in mathematics and music. In human life wisdom is sanity, balance, health and judgment. It is Wisdom that enables discernment, the skill of making wise choices in life. Wisdom includes knowledge and know-how: that ability to deal with stuff which enables you to improvise and repair; the doctor, the teacher, the builder, the scribe all need to be wise in their different ways. Wisdom includes household management, diplomacy and tact, knowing how people

tick and how to take people with you; all the skills that go into having what we might call emotional intelligence.

Wisdom is not a solitary pursuit. It is passed on and cultivated through personal encounter and this is expressed by the way Wisdom is personified in scripture. She (she is gendered female in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) – she accompanies God at creation; she builds her house, she prepares her banquet, she cries out to those hungry and thirsty for insight. Once again, the personal dimension of acquiring wisdom is inescapable. It involves hospitality, eating and drinking together, sharing experiences. Wisdom is the ground of resilience, because it always provides perspective. It is generous, forgiving. With wisdom you can bounce back from failure.

Swings in Education

In education there has been a swing in my life-time from the 'child-centred' education that was being advanced in the 1960s and 1970s to the outcomes based approach which is prevalent today. The swing represents two poles of thought which emerged from the European enlightenment. The child–centred approach had its roots in the thought of John-Jacques Rousseau; it was highly individualistic, making much of each child's subjectivity and cognitive innocence. The assumption was that with minimal guidance each child would find their way to a full flowering of personality and giftedness. It was probably always a bit bonkers, but there were schools where such an approach was applauded and could claim success, if not always academic success. But it also left many stranded, sometimes articulate, but with nothing really to say. All this has been attacked in recent years and partially reversed. As we all know the new norm is based on a rigorous attempt to improve educational outcomes by testing and validation.

And this trend is much wider than just in education. It actually feeds into the media world because it produces facts, trends, statistics; the kind of stuff that can be spun into stories of the kind you and I consume over our cornflakes. This outcome based approach is now everywhere. In the health service, in social work, in the police and prison service, in government itself. And we see in this an opposite trajectory of enlightenment thought; that trajectory which sees human activity in need of rationalisation and mechanization.

In education it assumes that the child comes into school basically unformed and in need of acquired knowledge, skills and competencies in order to slot into the demands society might make of them. If the danger of the child-centre approach was to romanticize the individual and cut them off from any needs, demands and expectations that wider society might have of them; the danger of the tick-box approach is that it risks treating people as if they are numbers rather than persons; fodder for an educational sausage machine.

I exaggerate to make the point, but I find when I talk to teachers, and to those in other parts of public life: academics, medics, nurses, there is an almost palpable greyness that comes over people; the sense that they are struggling to deliver the letter of the law as prescribed by those in authority over them, but at the expense sometimes of the spirit and of their own better judgement. There are financial issues, I know, and there is no doubt that our public services would be enhanced by massive inflows of cash; but that does not address the issue here.

Now when those thinking about the agenda appropriate for Church Schools begin talking about wisdom they are trying to go beyond both the child-centred and the outcomes orientated approaches in respect of children's education. Perhaps this has something to offer the rest of us.

Because what the language of Wisdom does is to set legitimate learning goals in the context of something wider; the making and formation of persons. We should all be concerned about that; about learning good judgment; self control, consideration for others.

Wisdom and Resilience

One of the buzz words about in the media, and in schools and workplaces at the moment is resilience. The fact that it resilience is being talked about so often suggests that it is not something to be taken for granted. Many people (and many of them young) are as we know vulnerable to self-doubt and disappointment and lack the ability to persist in something worthwhile. There seems to be less psychological robustness in society of the kind that might have been taken for granted in the 1950s and 1960s. Then we could say 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me'. This has become 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will cut me deeply'. It is true of course that there was probably less awareness then, and certainly less reporting of, the kind of mental health issues among young people that worry us today. But society was also less complicated, less divided. There was less money around and less to spend it on; fame and success and image were not worshipped in the way they are today.

So, resilience is an issue whatever we precisely mean by it; emotional health, a proportionate sense of personal worth, and I would add to that from a Christian perspective, an appropriate modesty and humility. I was rather struck by the final of Masterched when Saliha Mahmood won – a young doctor from a Pakistani family in Watford, by how her speech and demeanour embodied a kind of Englishess that you rarely find among those of purely English parentage today. She was like the girls I grew up with in the 50s and 60s. Modest, self-deprecating, beautifully spoken, funny, and dare I say it, wise. And resilient. She 'grew' as the series proceeded; staying true to her culinary tradition but also improvising, learning, extending her skills as she went along. It needs resilience to bounce back from failure. There is a tendency to take a rather technical approach to this issue, even to medicalise it. So if you are not resilient, you are, in some way, ill, and if you are ill you can be fixed. The whole mentality which produces the language of resilience tends to be functional. The person is a product to be put right so that they can fit like a cog into the system.

Philosophical Nihilism and Christian Roots

Behind this language there lies, I believe, a philosophical nihilism which has not been properly explored or exposed. It comes out of our refusal to consider the human person as anything more than a machine, in which awareness is no more than the flicker of neurons in the brain. The point of human existence in such a bleak perspective is to become as efficient as possible, to perform better, to produce and consume and to spend more and more. This is the emptiness of certain kinds of secularism; built with the support of the casual and unreasoned atheism that has become so popular over the last few decades. Its roots are shallow but very persistent, and I think it has had an extraordinarily depressing effect on the life of institutions in this country and also on the consciousness of individuals. Some intellectuals tend to glory in it and find the nihilism romantic, but that is because they are usually in a position to exercise their wills successfully to create whatever kind of life they like.

Not all are so fortunate. Many feel helpless and without a voice; that they do not have the opportunities others take for granted. They want material goods but at the same time resent their captivity to the global corporations which dominate our lives. Somehow they

protest about being reduced to no more than producers and consumers. Meanwhile the media, the schools and the universities often seem to be soaked in this nihilistic outlook and are deeply suspicious of any questioning of it. I do think that some of the box-ticking, highly-regulated culture that we all have live by now can be attributed to it; because this nihilism is inherently suspicious of more human qualities like trust and discretion. It also reduces personal formation to identity politics; that frenzied search for 'who am I?' which can nurture divisions that are not easily overcome.

We are still much dependent on our Christian heritage and secularism has not yet produced a version of what it is to be a human being that is wholly convincing or attractive in this country.

France's Secularism

This is in contrast, say, to France where the whole system is of course, rigorously secular; and the Church provides its ministry totally apart from the State. There is simplicity and clarity in that arrangement of course, and it is well-established. But our history and tradition is different.

Even in France, the rigorous secularism of the state produces something of a crisis in values when it is challenged by terrorism. It was a wake up call to me when President Holland spoke at the memorial ceremony for those killed in the Bataclan shootings in November 2015. As the victims had been watching football and dancing when they died he more or less said that we should counter the threats of ISIS and others by having more pop concerts and football matches. And at that point I found myself thinking this simply will not do.

A culture which is in denial about its religious roots and does not value those roots as a source of wisdom, generous tolerance and understanding will have little to offer those whose identity is forged by faith, and little to offer those many more people, who while not being explicitly Christian, still feel vaguely that they are more than mere producers and consumers; they are, we all are, more than intelligent machines.

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