

MINISTER'S LETTER

What sort of society do we live in?

What sort of society do we want to live in?

What is the role of the church in all of this?

Our new king has accepted the role of “Defender of the Faith”, and he has promised to protect democratic government and to serve. That sounds good to me. More strength to his arm! But these are not jobs for a king alone. Surely we too are defenders of the faith, defenders of democracy and willing servants. But do we actually live in a faith-full society and in what way does it need defending? There was a time, in my living memory at least, when we could speak with confidence of “the faith”. Nowadays it is not so easy. We might reasonably ask: “Which faith?”, because our social environment is not only multi-cultural, but multi-faith. We are no longer tempted to organise those faiths into a hierarchy — from better to worse, as we once might have done. What needs to be defended now is not the faith, but the right to have a faith. There are limits of course. We would not be ready to accept a faith that promoted child sacrifice. That would be indefensible. What also needs to be defended is the right to have no faith. In our society, and societies like ours, the most rapidly growing set of responders to questions about religion are the “I’m-spiritual-but-not-religious” lot. We can’t call them a group, or a church, or a faith, because they refuse to be organised and refuse to subscribe to any codified beliefs. There are, however, lots of them, and they will soon outnumber the faith-full. Where are they?

A couple of Sundays ago Margaret and I went to IKEA. We sat in the crowded cafeteria for a while, and I felt a kind of insight growing on me. I suggested to Margaret that if we wanted to know where the young people are who might otherwise be in church the answer was before us — in IKEA! That’s an exaggeration, of course. There are also many other temples of consumption, but there was a faith of sorts complete with a crowd of faithful devotees. There we could see enacted a faith in Swedish culture and know-how. A faith in efficiency. A faith in value. A faith in good design. These values of IKEA are, by no accident, also the values of a liberal-democratic society — particularly if we include the value of choice. These are a large part of what we might think of as the building blocks of our secular way of thinking. We might be tempted

to cast judgement on what we could say is a degenerate society — hell-bent on satisfying consumptive impulses and paying scant attention to so-called higher values, such as those talked about in churches. But we should not rush into judgment. These “consumers” are not bad people. These people are not selfish. Most of them are trying to live out good lives in good families. They are, in other words, like us.

By coincidence I am reading some of the letters the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote when he was in prison. He was in prison because he was implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Later, he would be executed. In a few of these letters Bonhoeffer teased out some ideas relating to what he called “religionless Christianity” and what he referred to as “a world come of age”. We need to recognise, argued Bonhoeffer, that the world has now pretty much addressed most of the big questions of life, and has developed a bunch of pretty plausible (if not complete) answers. It is a mistake, in Bonhoeffer’s eyes, for the church to insist that it has a monopoly over the asking of big questions and the way they are answered. The church has been painted into a corner and with its back to the wall has used the form and language of “religion” to claim a monopoly on what it means to live a good life. What is needed is a form of Christianity freed from empty forms — a Christianity that recognises what God has done and is doing out there in the big wide world and which gets in step with it. That is the sort of faith that is worth defending. That is the sort of faith that has underpinned democracy. That is the sort of faith that calls us into service — the sort of service that promotes life; the sort of service that hurts; the sort of service that is the embodiment of love.

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