

“Is there a continuing relevance for regular chapel worship/services in an increasingly secular age, if so what is it?” Revd Tim Hunt (Chaplain 2001 – present)

It would seem that the purpose of this talk is either to do myself out of a job, or else to be an apologist for it... where will it land, I wonder...?

The 2021 census for England and Wales tells us that just under half the population of this country hold fast to the Christian faith; Islam 6.5% of the population; other religions 3.6% and in order of highest to lowest numbers these include Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism, in that order.

So, just over half the population declares itself to be religious.

Among Christians Anglicans are the most common denomination, followed by Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists.

I’m not quite sure where all these Christians are, though, they don’t seem to be going to church!

This fact, and the relatively large number of individuals with nominal or no religious affiliations, has led commentators to variously describe the United Kingdom as a multi-faith and secularised society.

British society is apparently – according to Wikipedia – one of the most secularised in the world and in many surveys determining religious beliefs of the population agnosticism, non-theism, atheism, secular humanism and non-affiliation are views shared by large percentages of Britons: that’s the other half who aren’t religious.

Some British people and organisations in the United Kingdom, such as Humanists UK, hold the view that the UK should become a secular state, with no official or established religion.

A survey published in April 2022 also revealed that whereas a fifth of those polled thought that Anglican bishops should remain in the House of Lords, three-fifths thought they (as unelected clerics) did not have a place in a modern legislature and another fifth were "don't know."

Commenting on this, Martyn Percy, former dean of Christ Church, Oxford, noted that "To the extent that the Church [of England] retains unique privileges in comparison with any other religious organisations, it can be said that the UK has religious freedom – but, embarrassingly, not religious equality."

Well, there’s the statistics for you.

We live in a society where half the population don’t seem to believe in anything, very much, except perhaps a form of materialism, both in terms of wealth generation and in terms of what it means to be human: I am no more than the sum total of my parts: my body generates my thoughts and my sense of self, my sense of consciousness.

There is only what I see in front of me, what I perceive with my senses – I am bound up in the stuff of planet earth, I am here for no reason, other than I am: existence is a brute fact and has no purpose except to “seize the day” and make as much of life as I possibly can before I die or else someone kills me in an act of terrorism or warfare.

On this basis, at least half the school would seem to fall into this category and a sense of the physical over the spiritual holds sway, I would suggest – it is the prevailing wind.

So, what to do with chapel?

Various suggestions for you: an exam hall, a concert venue, a gym, an indoor swimming pool, a spill-over for School House?

I have to say, I rather like the idea of a Gothic swimming pool, the Lady Chapel a steam room and the vestries a physio suite to massage away those tiresome sports’ injuries.

Such a huge wasted space, with so much potential for the further physical needs of Blundellians.

David Hamer may well remember the occasion the chapel aisle was converted into a cricket square!

However, is the education of Blundellians really just all about physical needs with a bit of something academic on the side?

I suspect that if the chapel became some kind of spa-oriented facility that the question of well-being might crop-up.

Yes, well-being, mindfulness, the admission that perhaps there is a bit more to life than just our physical material needs.

Indeed, the evidence to support the spiritual alongside the physical is a concept that still pervades what we mean by a rounded education, in fact inspectors *have* to inspect it: we simply can’t ignore it or pretend it isn’t there.

Why is it, too, that mental health, especially in the young, has become such a significant aspect of pastoral care?

The pandemic highlighted a rise in mental health issues: the impossibility of the idealised physical so much a pressure forced on the young by social media.

If you’re not satisfied with your appearance have surgery, or go to the gym, or take hormones to change your sex.

Mental health is about so many of these things today and yet the answer seems, so often, to be a physical one.

Depression, lack of confidence, drugs to cure you from these ailments are the quick fix for pressurised GPs.

But the real issue seems to be something much deeper: an existential crisis which is fundamentally about who one is.

I am not just my body, I am my spirit.

Bruce Greyson, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia has dedicated much of his career to the study of near-death experiences.

In his recent book "After" he posits the view that far from the idea that our brains, our minds, generate our awareness of our existence, our consciousness, it is, actually, the other way round.

Our bodies are merely the vehicles for our conscious selves.

To, therefore, dismiss the conscious, what we commonly term the spiritual as merely a physical illusion simply isn't true.

The soul, the spirit, consciousness – what the ancients referred to as the "anima" – that which animates us indeed does just that.

In fact quantum reality suggests that what has from Newton onwards been regarded as fixed is actually in a state of flux.

Matter, the physical nature of our world is made of atoms and sub-atomic particles which may descend into infinity.

Matter is not fixed, it is constantly changing – we only have to look at the way in which we age to see that!

What remains is what I might call myself, because without myself, I am nothing.

Consciousness moves matter, not matter consciousness.

If we don't attend to our spiritual needs we become half people.

We need to understand our inner lives, we need to be able to reflect, to consider who we are in relation to others, we need to connect properly with the world around us.

Our inner life fosters that and our inner self is the only place that we truly know, it is a place of loneliness because only we can know ourselves.

But what if you can't know yourself?

What if you are confused and alone to such an extent that you are overwhelmed by it?

Mindfulness can help, but sometimes we need more than ourselves to help ourselves.

And that's where God comes in.

Something above and beyond us, something greater than our little selves stuck on planet earth with nowhere else to go.

Consciousness, our spirit, our soul takes us on a journey into eternity with a creator God who loves us unconditionally and who gives purpose and meaning to existence.

I do not believe mindfulness is enough; we need the unconditional love of a being beyond us but who is part of us, who inspires, encourages, counsels and directs.

Perhaps, after all, chapel is better remaining a place for that encounter to happen.

That sense of something bigger than us is shown in the memorial cross of the First World War on the lawn outside chapel; the War Memorial of Blundellians of the Second World War at the chapel's west end; the names of hundreds of worthy individuals whose plaques grace the walls of chapel: Old Blundellians, teachers, school support staff who have made their contribution not only to those of the past, but in the ways they have contributed to the shaping of the school as it is now; in the words of A.L. Francis:

"We kneel where our forefathers knelt,
They trode these courts before us,
Unseen, though near, our hearts love felt
Their blessings hover oe'r us."

But chapel is not just an historical monument to the past, it is a living building and continues to maintain within Blundell's a living faith.

Yes, the secular may be half the story but the other half is still Christian.

It was Peter Blundell's intention that those who came to the school should learn about Christian values and practice them in their lives.

What of multi-culturalism?

As I said earlier, the Anglican Church, the Church of England is still here.

And Christianity has to be understood and articulated properly if we are to understand where we are now.

Without reference to the Christian faith we fail to understand our history and our institutions, without reference to the Christian faith we fail to understand our culture: our music, our art, our literature and, yes, even our science.

Without Christianity we are disconnected from our identity as a nation.

And that is sadly what is happening.

When Queen Elizabeth II died earlier this year a memorial service from St Paul's Cathedral was televised.

It was an event which anybody could attend and the church was packed.

As the camera panned round during the service barely anyone was singing.

They didn't know the hymns, they were not obtuse choices, they were standard church repertoire.

Those people wanted to be there, because the monarch had died – they needed to put it into some kind of context – but they were also disconnected from its common language.

Any current Blundellian attending that service at St Paul's Cathedral would have been able to splutter out, in the best way they could, every single one of those hymns.

They would have felt connected to it, because being in a Christian place of worship is not alien, and it is not without meaning.

They may treat it with a degree of healthy scepticism but they know it's referencing something much bigger and deeper.

As a former dean of that same cathedral, Dean William Ralph Inge once remarked "children are caught, not taught."

How many boys and girls have been "caught" by the experience of chapel?

I honestly don't know.

But it's why I felt called to school chaplaincy.

The opportunity to discuss what belief is, what it means, what its impact can be has been at the heart of that calling.

To what extent and how much I have "caught" Blundellians on the way I shall never know, there are thousands of them.

To what extent I have "taught" Blundellians - well that's shown in the results of the RS Department.

I don't entirely hold to Dean Inge's view that it is all about being "caught" – an unthinking faith is hard to justify in a world which wants proof for everything.

But maybe a chaplain is part of that living "proof".

I take great delight in telling Blundellians that I would not be here in this place if God had not called me.

They may think I'm deluded, they may not fully believe or understand it, but there is testimony there and huge responsibility for the weight of faith you carry and indeed how that is worked out in this context where one has to be both loving in a Christ-like sense but also someone of authority and sometimes necessary firmness.

The official religion of the UK remains Christianity.

The Church of England: the state church.

Charles III will be crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a former Archbishop of Canterbury was, of course, Old Blundellian, Frederick Temple and crowned King Edward VII – he is in the commemoration window above the Great Doors into chapel.

Again, this established faith is about our nation and its identity.

Nebulous spirituality and a smorgasbord of religions is constrained by breadth.

As G.K. Chesterton allegedly remarked:

"When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing anything."

Shamanism is the fastest growing form of "religious spirituality" in the UK today.

Incidentally I saw a mother and her boy on Saturday morning hugging one of the lime trees alongside the path around Big Field.

We don't get any less spiritual.

When we move away from one faith, we just turn to other alternatives.

Atheism is another way of believing.

I hear some Blundellians say, I don't believe in God I believe in science as though it is some kind of alternative belief system, an alternative religion.

Science means "knowledge": knowledge of the way the world seems to work when we look closely at it.

It does not, nor ever can, answer the ultimate question "Why?"

A religious approach to life articulates a particular vocabulary into which we can contextualise something like Remembrance.

A general spiritual/non-religious humanistic approach struggles with a lack of vocabulary.

Yes, we can take themes such as peace, love and forgiveness but where did these notions come from in the first place?

Suffering arguably never makes sense, but it makes some sense to look at the cross and to know that God suffers on that cross in solidarity with a fallen human race.

God can give a sense of justice to our unjust world and puts us **not** into a finite understanding of things but one that is eternal.

I shall leave the last word, once again, with A.L. Francis:

"We praise thy name for one and all
Who founded for Thy glory
Each ancient School, each Minster tall,
To teach their sons Thy story.
May we, like them, our Lamp display
Of love and wisdom burning,
Till twilight melt in golden day
At our dear Lord's returning."