

The Thirty-first
ERIC SYMES ABBOTT
Memorial Lecture

**THE SACRED, THE PROFANE
AND THE DESECRATED**

delivered by

Professor Roger Scruton
Writer and Philosopher

at Westminster Abbey
on Thursday 26 May 2016

and

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The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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The Sacred, the Profane and the Desecrated
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The Sacred, the Profane and the Desecrated

It is a great privilege to give the Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture, and to honour the memory of a man who combined, in his person and his office, the two great virtues of the Anglican Communion – public authority, and unostentatious faith. As Dean of Westminster and Chaplain to the Queen, Abbott was a prominent representative of the Anglican Church in its official capacity. In his writings and sermons, however, he exhibited a sincere spirituality, of the unassuming and deeply personal kind that we find in George Herbert, Richard Hooker and T.S. Eliot. It is, in my view, one of the achievements of the Anglican Church to have combined the official and the personal in that way, dignifying the offices of government, while sheltering within its ranks the indigenous spirituality of people like Dean Abbott. In my book *Our Church*, I review the social and political history that created the outward forms of Anglican Christianity. In this lecture, as a tribute to Abbott, I want to say something about the soul of Anglicanism, and the particular conception of the sacred that has made the Anglican Church such an important participant in the spiritual history of our country.

The Anglican Church as Abbott understood it, and as I speak of it today, is to a great extent an outside observer of the communities that now fall under its charge. It has retreated from making doctrinal pronouncements, and is acutely conscious of representing only one small segment of our own population here in the United Kingdom. Like the rest of the Western world today, our country is governed by a secular morality, operating upon materialist goals. We have devised a system of rights and entitlements that enable us to settle who owns what, who has been cheated, and who deserves to pay. Rough and ready though it is, the system serves to maintain peaceful relations among people, each of whom is striving to advance his material interest. And ethical theories in our time all focus upon the distribution of material rewards, as though there were nothing else at stake in our social endeavours.

Some believe that the crucial moral idea is justice, and that the concern of justice is with the distribution of benefits. Others are more interested in freedom, and see morality as a device for enlarging the scope of human choice, and protecting the individual from coercion by his rivals. Whichever line we take – and the political options today seem to derive from one or other of those patterns – the rewards of life are seen in purely earthly terms: property, consumption, freedom, pleasure and power. Morality is simply the way we have devised for pursuing these things without getting in each other's way: the system of constraints that enable us to go about our business without conflict, neatly apologising as we step aside from the other person's ambitions, in pursuit of ambitions of our own. And by and large it works. Some people make a place for religion in this scheme of things. But they refer its authority to the same earthly values as the prevailing moral code: religion becomes the voice of compassion, the urge to pay attention to those who are falling by the wayside in the universal race for material rewards. But it offers only rewards of the same kind.

At the same time there is an awareness that something is missing from that vision of human life. Almost all art and literature of our time is devoted to defining, capturing, lamenting or execrating this missing thing. The expression that occurs to me whenever I attempt to define it is 'the sacred': our public morality is a desacralized morality, which permits and forbids, but which does not deal in sacred things. We live by a set of rules that enable us to cooperate to our common good, and which can themselves be changed by negotiation. Sacred things, by contrast, are non-negotiable: they are protected by an aura, and you cannot argue this aura away, or pass over it in the interests of a deal.

This points me towards an obvious starting point for my argument, namely sex, which our ancestors surrounded with sacred prohibitions, and which we have flung open to public view, without, however, coming to understand it. Sexual morality was traditionally governed by ideas of purity and pollution. The path of purity had to be strictly adhered to, with sex forbidden outside marriage and carefully controlled within it. A measure of hypocrisy relaxed the regime for men; but not for women. The woman was untouchable and therefore defiled by touch; and such an idea of feminine purity has been common to human communities throughout recorded history. Traditional societies made a kind of existential distinction, between the woman who has remained a virgin until

marriage and a chaste wife thereafter, and the woman who has taken another path, and who fends for herself unprotected by a husband. It was almost as though these were two different human kinds, as distinct from each other as man and woman, or the living and the dead. This distinction between the two kinds of woman can be found in all communities of which we have a written record, and notably in those of Israel, Greece and Rome.

In the medieval cult of the Virgin the idea of feminine purity was exalted into a mystical vision of redemption. The untouchable Madonna, who is both virgin and mother, shines her light on us all, offering a way to salvation that is wrapped in the comforts of childhood. This idealized woman, in whom sexual purity, erotic enchantment and maternal consolation are somehow synthesized, has dominated our art and literature down to the Enlightenment and beyond. She is the Virgin and child of Duccio, Lippi and Bellini, constantly reimagined, and always adapted to our spiritual yearnings. She is Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura. She is Goethe's Gretchen, and also the 'Ewig-weibliche' that draws us towards the eternal. She is the child bride of Dickens, and the sentimentalized home-builder and beautifier of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*. During the course of the nineteenth century she gets more sexy, but, as we rediscover her in Wagner's death-devoted heroines, it is precisely her sex that is most dangerous. If you come across the pure unsullied virgin, lying in male armour on a mountaintop, best to turn back to the suburbs and not do the foolish thing that Siegfried did, which was to kiss the thing awake.

It was in protest against this unmanageable ideal of feminine purity that Hardy prefaced *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with the subtitle 'A Pure Woman'. Like Hardy, we have moved on from the old way of seeing things, and are aware of the oppressive social structures that maintained it in being. But its traces remain, and I want to reflect a little on why that is so. Essentially, the traditional approach to female sexuality was a survival of what the anthropologist Mary Douglas called the 'ethic of pollution and taboo'; and it is very clear that this ethic is of a completely different kind from what we observe today. In contemporary society ideas of purity and pollution are rejected as covert attempts to rob women of the control of their bodies, and to prepare them as the property of men. This does not mean that we have no taboos: but they are, like the speech-codes imposed by political correctness, moves in a power game,

rather than guides to a pure form of life.

At certain periods the division between the pure and the polluted has been directly connected with that between the sacred and the desecrated. This is what we encounter in the art and literature of courtly love. The object of courtly love was not just set upon a pedestal; she was regarded as profaned by any normal approach. She could be touched only after many ordeals, and even so the full consummation of desire was not in question. To behave in any other way would be to desecrate the object of worship, much as you desecrate the holy instruments at the altar by touching them with profane hands. It was during the time of courtly love that the Church declared marriage to be a sacrament, in other words a transaction that was not to be understood as a contract between negotiating partners, but as a vow before God, an oath sanctified by something more than our agreements.

That old way of seeing things has been surpassed, but not entirely. Many Muslim communities retain a version of the ethic of pollution and taboo. If women step out of line – even if they are victims of rape – they are often condemned as whores, and may even become the victims of ‘honour killing’. Sexual behaviour of both men and women is regulated by an idea of purity, and this idea in turn is bound up with the Shari’ah – the way of life laid down by God himself, through the words and deeds of his prophet. To transgress the code is to desecrate what God has made holy – namely human life.

Secular people also experience the survival of this older sexual ethic, often in ways that surprise and disturb them. As the inhibitions have vanished our attention is drawn more and more to those last redoubts of purity where the threat of pollution remains. This surely underlies the recent witch-hunts of paedophiles – those who have violated the last precinct of the sacred. Or is it the last precinct? Other recent developments perhaps suggest otherwise. Consider the new sexual crimes, committed often on the campus, where young people believe for whatever reason that consent is what it is all about, the necessary and sufficient condition for ‘good sex’. Sometimes the result is ‘bad sex’ – that sudden sense of violation that ensues when the girl recognizes, too late, that consent is after all *not* what it is all about. The result is a charge of ‘date rape’, in itself an assault on the girl’s seducer, but also a last ditch attempt

to make sense of her own moral feelings. The mess in which many young people find themselves today is proof, it seems to me, that the de-sacralised morality of our times is in fact inadequate to deal with our sexual emotions.

It is surely true that nobody who denies himself concepts of pollution and desecration can begin to encompass the feelings of the rape-victim. Forced against her will to experience her sex as a bodily function rather than a gift of herself, she feels polluted in her very being. And how the victim *perceives* the act is internally connected to what the act *is*. The sense of defilement and desecration is not an *illusion* on the victim's part: it is an accurate perception of what has been done to her, and deliberately done. If we are to believe that morality is merely an instrument for ensuring that human relations proceed by negotiation and agreement rather than by force, this perception must appear entirely excessive, and rape victims who make a fuss must be compared to people who try to sue those who bump into them in the street.

Such examples remind us that ideas of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the polluted are not simply brought into being by religion: if anything, it is the other way round. These ideas arise spontaneously in our close encounters, when abstract negotiation is replaced by real bodily contact. Sex is one of the ways in which we become aware that the human form has an aura, that we are shielded from each other by boundaries that cannot be transgressed without violation. And it is partly from such experiences that religion takes its authority – religion is a way of making sense of experiences that endure even when the theological doctrines have lost their ability to persuade us.

Hence when the Christian faith, at the Enlightenment, began to lose its hold over European civilisation it was not the sense of the sacred that disappeared. Rather people began to look for the sacred elsewhere than in the dogmas and rituals of the Church. The romantics turned to nature, finding in the beauty and sublimity of the natural world something of the 'real presence' of God. In due course art was promoted to the task of recording and propagating the experience of sacred things. Through tragedy and lyric poetry, through landscape painting and portraiture, through opera and the concert hall, visions were created of a higher life than the life of the marketplace – a life in which our loves and sufferings were presented in purified and ideal form.

Those visions of a purified life are no longer easily created. Take a trip to Tate Modern and you will see every kind of sordid and demeaning image, every way of pouring scorn on the human form and the human condition. You will discover art devoted to reminding us that we are just animals, distinguished from our near relations only by the unbounded perversity of our desires. You might think that this is a final goodbye to sacred things, that the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the pure and the polluted have at last been set aside. But a moment's reflection suggests that to be the opposite of the truth. In Young British Art (I think here especially of the Chapman Brothers) we witness the desecration of the human form and the life of the spirit. Desecration is an inverted tribute paid to sacred things, by the one who feels judged by them. You can only desecrate what is sacred, and your act of desecration is a kind of curse, a wiping away of the aura from an object that shines on you from another and higher sphere. This feature of modern art is one aspect of the 'disenchantment' that the great sociologist Max Weber saw to be distinctive of the modern condition. But desecration goes one stage further than disenchantment. It actively makes war on sacred things, so as to reduce them to objects and to trample them underfoot.

I have singled out the sexual experience as one to which ideas of the polluted and the pure still adhere, even if not in the form that they once took. In our original tribal state it is to be supposed that sexual union was of such overwhelming communal interest that it was closely controlled, surrounded by prohibitions and endorsed through collective ceremonies. It was a 'liminal' moment, as the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described it, a threshold, at which the tribe acknowledges the cycle of its life, and dedicates the present generation to the generations that have gone before and to those who are yet to come. Birth too is such a moment, as is death, the final transition into the realm of the ancestors. All such events are marked out by rites of passage, and at all of them sacred rituals are performed and sacred words spoken. Even in an open society, in which tribal feelings have been transcended and discarded, people feel the need, at such moments, for words, actions and ceremonies with a sacred character. And this raises the question of what we mean when we call something sacred, why sacred things are necessary to us, and what should we do to provide them? Put very briefly, the Anglican Church has evolved in answer to those

questions. It has been a constant attempt, within the context of the Christian communion, to define, safeguard and adapt the idea of the sacred, so as to fit it to our needs in a changing world.

Emile Durkheim, founding father of modern sociology, described the sacred as a realm 'set aside and forbidden'. The purpose of creating such a realm, he thought, was to reinforce the experience of membership. We, the adherents of the faith, distinguish the sacred from the profane, and our doing so is a sign that we live rightly, in accordance with the laws of the community. Those outside the community do not acknowledge what we regard as sacred, and that is the sure sign that they do not belong. On this understanding the more arbitrary the division between sacred and profane the more effective the result – the sacred words and objects acquire the full emotional weight of our social membership, precisely because their sacred character admits of no other explanation. In them is condensed the history, the right and the long-term survival of the community.

Undeniably Durkheim is right that the idea of the sacred is connected to fundamental feelings of community. But the choice of the events, objects and words to regard as sacred is not arbitrary at all. Imagine a people who burden their lives with fussy but inexplicable distinctions between what must be done and what cannot be done – for instance when placing one's foot within the boundary of a paving stone, when holding a handkerchief to sneeze, when passing a dog in the street – but who pay no attention to their own or other people's behaviour in the presence of birth, copulation and death. We would say that their fussy distinctions are mere superstitions, which have nothing to do with the sacred at all. It is only when brought to bear on the crucial transitions, and the critical hopes and fears that are then in issue, that the rituals and words acquire their holy character. They exist in order to raise us up, at these critical times, so as to look with open eyes towards the transcendental. They are acts of symbolism, ways of representing the human condition as rescued from mortal decay.

This can be seen especially clearly in the final rite of passage, the funeral rite. For Durkheim this event is sanctified by the ritual, and the ritual sanctifies because it must be performed exactly, despite having no explanation, other than this one, that it must be performed exactly. Appealing though that account is, it

seems to me to be precisely the reverse of the truth. It is not the ritual that confers sanctity on the event, but the event that confers sanctity on the ritual. In the presence of death we are confronted with the fundamental enigma of our condition – the enigma of being. The corpse before us is the real presence of nothingness: the visible proof that personal being can be taken completely away. Here we come up against three solemn mysteries: that we exist, that we might not have existed, and that one day we shall exist no more. The ritual presents these mysteries, puts a frame around them, so that we come face to face, in the moment of loss, with the infinite preciousness of life itself. Something similar can be said, of course, of the other rites of passage: but it is our awe in the presence of death that encapsulates the fundamental contrast – the contrast between being and nothingness – that both eludes our understanding, and comes before us as something that we *must* understand. Here, I believe, is the source of man's religious need, and the true meaning of sacraments.

There is another aspect of the sacred that needs to be considered, and that is sacrifice. The word comes from '*sacrum facere*', to make sacred; and it has acquired, over the centuries, an interesting double meaning. A sacrifice is an offering made at the altar, often, in the past, a blood offering, a creature, sometimes even a human being, killed to please the deity. A sacrifice is also a gift, of time, energy, comfort, even of life itself, made for another's sake. You sacrifice yourself by taking on some burden, and you do it in order to relieve a burden that lies on someone else. In a striking book (*Violence and the Sacred*) René Girard suggested that the sacrifice of a victim is, in fact, the primordial experience of the sacred, the primeval act, remembered and re-enacted, through which the distinction between the sacred and the profane is planted in our awareness.

All human communities are riven with conflict and competition, Girard tells us, and the accumulated blood-feuds would be intolerable were it not possible to transfer them, from time to time, to a victim, a scapegoat, who, by some primal fault, is excluded from the community and who can therefore be sacrificed without perpetuating the cycle of revenge. The victim becomes holy in the moment of his death, for it is exactly at this point that he lifts the burden of our resentments, and restores the peace for whose loss he took the temporary blame. According to Girard the collective sacrifice of a victim was the original source

of sacred rites and moments – the event at the edge of life, where another order of meaning shines through. And for Girard this constantly recurring event was brought to completion and transcended in the crucifixion, when, as St Luke tells us, the victim understood and forgave his tormentors. Then, for the first time, the way out of human cruelty was made clear to us. The burden of resentment was lifted and forgiveness offered in its place.

We do not need to follow Girard in thinking that the violent sacrifice of a victim is the sole source of the distinction between the sacred and the profane. All that is necessary is to recognize that we have been presented, in the Gospel narrative, with an example of self-sacrifice that was also a ‘making sacred’ – the founding of a sacred space into which we can come for safety. In one of his meditations on the Transfiguration, Eric Symes Abbott writes that ‘the Church is the place where the tensions of human life have to be resolved at the deepest level, and peace only comes at extreme cost. *“He made peace by the blood on his Cross”* (Col 1:20).’ In other words, the Church enshrines the great blood-sacrifice by which reconciliation and forgiveness became open to us all. Through the Church Christ invites us to re-enact the passion, to join together in a collective act of remembrance, so as to be reconciled to each other in a spirit of contrition. We then understand and accept the gift of being.

Here is the point on which I wish to dwell, since it is one that would surely have been dear to the heart of Dean Abbott. The Anglican Church survived the long battle against puritanism in the 17th century, not because it was allied with the powers that be – on the contrary, for much of the century it was the puritans who had the upper hand. It survived because it administered the sacraments. Beneath the outward show of a regal fiefdom, the Anglican Church concealed the sacramental bequest of the Catholic faith, including the service of Holy Communion, and all the devotional practices associated with it. It was not there to conscript people to the King’s armies, or to maintain the outward show of discipline. It was there to secure the inner peace and reconciliation that comes, when people bow their heads in the presence of sacred things. If it were not so the Anglican Church could never have produced the abundant poetry, music and devotional literature with which we are familiar, nor would the idiom of its liturgy or the language of its Bible have so thoroughly penetrated the hearts and minds of English-speakers down the centuries since the first appearance of the

King James Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Anglican settlement was not built around the sovereign or the institutions of public policy. It was neither a violent protest against ‘popery’ of the kind fomented by the puritans, nor an affirmation of the individual conscience against the surrounding consensus. It was an attempt to rescue the sacraments from the inferno of civil conflict, and to offer to the people the consolation of sacred rituals in their moments of trial. It was built around Holy Communion, and all those intimations of the sacred and the meaning of sacrifice which I have touched on in this lecture can be found explicitly rehearsed in the service of Holy Communion as we have it in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which also calls this service, in Protestant fashion, ‘*The Lord’s Supper*’. This is not to deny that the Anglican Church has also offered to its congregation the consolations of religious doctrine, and a way of making sense of life in terms of a creed and a promise. The 17th and 18th centuries saw the emergence of a distinctive Anglican literature, devoted to expounding the articles of belief, and relying on the Bible as God’s word. But this literature was a *devotional* literature: it was a supplement to the central rite of religion, which is the moment at the altar when sinner and Redeemer come face to face.

The *Book of Common Prayer* adds a most interesting preface to the Service of Communion, in which it asks the Curate, prior to the service, to ascertain whether any of those intending to take Communion bear malice towards their neighbours, and to do his utmost to reconcile them in a spirit of mutual forgiveness, in order that they might participate in the rite. For what is forgiveness if not a sacrifice, a renunciation of the desire for revenge, for the sake of another? The Service aims to re-enact the greatest sacrifice of all, in order to bring us, who are incapable of such a deed, within its redeeming influence. It follows closely the Roman Catholic Mass, and, like the Mass, should be understood as a performance in which we participate, one that has come down to us, and which has survived by adaptation as much as by design.

It begins with the prayer that Christ taught us, in which the central thought is that we receive forgiveness only if we offer it; and this prayer is immediately followed by the profound and simple collect, which asks God to ‘*cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly*

love thee and worthily magnify thy Holy Name.’ The whole service that follows is structured around the idea of repentance and forgiveness – the confession to sin and the absolution offered to the one who truly repents of it. Nowadays the congregation as a whole is encouraged to add their voice to the Priest, in uttering the words of humble access: ‘*we do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table...*’ It is at this point, of course, that the astonishing claim is made that the congregation is about to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Saviour – in other words, that the supreme sacrifice of the Son of God was a sacrifice in both senses, the violent destruction of a creature of flesh and blood, and a self-giving for the sake of others.

There is, it seems to me, no way to explain this idea without contradiction: mysteries are to be repeated, not explained. The point of the Eucharist is not the doctrines that strive in vain to make sense of it, but the enactment of the rite, whereby the participant rehearses the death of the Saviour, stands in the very light of it, and senses its cleansing purpose in himself. This is the primordial experience of the sacred – a purifying rite, a new beginning, a gift of innocence, a visitation of the transcendental. It is also represented, in Christian doctrine, as a vanquishing of death through the death that was voluntarily submitted to on our behalf. The Church’s view of the sacrament, as the outward sign of an inward Grace, emphasizes what is common to all rites dispensed from the altar: they are gifts received from God, which lift us *towards* God. Ordinary lives and ordinary feelings, placed in the light that shines at the altar, are transfigured. They cease to be ordinary – or rather, their ordinarieness is re-constructed as a blessing.

Secular morality doesn’t easily make sense of such things, but sacred art in our tradition has done what it can to clarify them and this is one reason why art is so important to us now, as we strive to hold on to the fragments of our religious heritage. I think of Beethoven’s setting of the words ‘*Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini*’ – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – which is the heart of his *Missa Solemnis*. Beethoven gives the burden of expression not to the sung words but to a solo violin, the spirit above the community, shining upon it with an unearthly compassion. Beethoven’s music does not explain this

blessing, it confers it. And musical people respond immediately, knowing that just *this* is what would bring us to the altar and enfold us with peace. (Beethoven says as much in the famous words that he added to the score, presented to Archduke Rudolf.)

At the time when the communion service was fought over, with Roman Catholics insisting on transubstantiation and Puritans dismissing the whole thing as hocus pocus, the Anglican divines like Hooker, Andrewes and South argued that, in the only sense that matters, Christ is *in* the bread and wine, since he enters thereby the spirit of the one who consumes them. The relics of this great theological conflict are preserved in article 28 of the articles of religion, as these were incorporated in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and this is not the place to discuss the theological intricacies. My point is only to insist that, in the service of Holy Communion, the Anglican Church gives voice to its real meaning as a spiritual resource. It is in this way that it takes the congregation into the heart of Christ's sacrifice, and inspires a like spirit of sacrifice in those who participate in the drama.

I use the word 'drama' advisedly, because that, in the end, is what a sacrament is – a rehearsal in symbolic form of emotions that we cannot explain clearly in any other way. Sacraments occur on the edge between being and nothingness, and it is there that we turn our eyes away from this world towards the transcendental, hoping perhaps to encounter the face of the Saviour, but knowing in our hearts that such an encounter is not of this world. The performance at the altar represents this turn towards the transcendental, and in imagination we follow it and are fulfilled by it.

Since Aristotle's *Poetics* critics and philosophers have pondered the paradox of tragedy, asking themselves why people should flock to see these terrible events, in which noble characters are ruined, often through no fault of their own, and how it is that the audience emerges from the experience with a sense, as Aristotle put it, of having been purged of oppressive feelings. The paradox loses some of its sharpness when we see that in tragedy too we are being confronted with sacred things. That which awes us, like the spectacle of death, also invites us to come forward in confessional spirit, to partake of the sacrifice, and to feel the burden of our darker and more malignant feelings lifted from us. This is

what the sacrament achieves for the ordinary participant in Holy Communion, and it was this means of spiritual renewal, offered to all penitent believers, that the Anglican Church saved from the turmoil that tore our country apart in the 17th century.

What does the experience of the sacred do for the faithful? The comparison with tragedy is helpful here. Our ordinary morality of negotiation and agreement is from the metaphysical point of view an unstable edifice, which rests upon dark foundations that we try not to expose. The fear of death and suffering never entirely releases us, and in the face of this fear we have only one recourse, which is membership, the community that absorbs and survives us, and for which we could make the ultimate sacrifice. The tragic theatre of the Greeks addressed this darker side of our nature, gave it form and coherence, and purified the audience in something like the way that the faithful are purified by the enactment of Christ's sacrifice. In the Eucharist, as in tragedy, those dark feelings are exposed – but in remembered or imagined form – allowed to go through their cycle, and put to rest until the next repetition of the rite. And here is an important fact about the rite of communion – that its meaning lies precisely in its repetition, its maintenance as a constant spiritual hum in the background of ordinary life, which stills the resentments and the fears that might otherwise overwhelm us. This feature of the Eucharist is brilliantly dramatized by Wagner in *Parsifal*.

The yearning for the sacred remains with us, and will never be stilled by our morality of negotiated deals. It wells up in us from our deepest fear, which is the fear of death, and from our most important need, which is the need for love, for membership, and for the act of self-sacrifice. It is because this yearning is unsatisfied in us that we are tempted to desecrate its object – to regard life itself as a negotiable pleasure, and to jeer at those who live in another way. Almost all the major conflicts in modern societies are between those who strive to cling to sacred things, and those who wish to deprive those things of their aura. Such are the disputes over marriage, abortion, pornography, assisted dying, the age of consent, and the dispute between the Shari'ah and the secular state – disputes that make no sense at all except in terms of the conflict between the sacred and the profane. As secularisation turns first to profanation and then to desecration the sense of contamination grows, and the yearning for the sacred begins to take

dangerous forms, as among so many young Muslims today, encouraged to seek their own personal encounter with death, and to purify their being by wiping everything away, their own being included.

In the serious situation in which we now find ourselves, it is hard to believe in the old Anglican dispensation, which ministers to dwindling congregations and has become the target of fierce discrimination from the secular culture. But I take comfort from it nevertheless, because I believe that the Anglican Church holds an open door out of the madness, into the quiet home that has always been ours. This is what draws me to the Anglican tradition of spirituality, represented by Dean Abbott. The unassuming ritual of the Eucharist, clothed in the language of penitence and forgiveness, removed from daily life but placed at the heart of a public religion with a public and secular face, provides a kind of spiritual nourishment that threatens no one, and welcomes everyone. This is what the Church protected in the years when the puritans set out to '*prove their doctrine orthodox, by apostolic blows and knocks*', and what it still makes available, in its shy way, today. Whatever the future brings, I am grateful that this gift has been offered to me, and that it is offered still to those who come '*in the name of the Lord*'.
