



Archbishop of Canterbury

University College London
and The Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA)
'Enriching the Arguments'

A lecture by The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams
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Years ago, when I was studying and then teaching at Cambridge, one of the most overwhelming influences on my thinking was the late Professor Donald MacKinnon. Famously eccentric, painfully difficult to follow in lectures, but also illuminating to a unique degree if you persevered, one of his regular themes was how the insularity of British intellectual life so often reflected the way in which intellectuals in Britain since the seventeenth century had been largely spared the trauma of violent social upheaval and political repression. In order to understand what moral philosophy – and indeed theology – was really about, he implied, you would have to immerse yourself in another mental climate, that of continental Europe. And a rather similar point was made by another giant of the mid-century philosophical world (still happily with us), Alasdair Macintyre, when he wrote rather mordantly about how liberal Christians in the sixties borrowed the language and experience of persecuted figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Hitler's Germany in order to support a very low-key and domesticated kind of radicalism; whereas, he argued, only in extreme situations like Bonhoeffer's prison did the language make sense. In the light of this, it was not surprising when, at one point in the early eighties, when the theological syllabus at Cambridge was being revised, the suggestion was more than half-seriously made that there should be a compulsory module on Germany in the thirties for all who wanted to study theology as their main subject.

All this was not, of course, primarily to do with British intellectuals looking wistfully across the Channel to a more exciting and risk-laden world – though there were elements of this sort of romanticism in some of us, I have no doubt. It also reflected the significance within university life – and of course beyond it too – of the presence of émigré academics and writers, who, whether they were technically refugees or not, would certainly not have been there if it had not been for the political situation in Europe in the thirties and after; those haggard and often exasperated figures who would

sit on the edge of polite university discussions until they felt forced to break in with an uncomfortable and indigestible perspective which made the rest of the talk look very domestic. We are used to celebrating the impact of émigré and refugee intellectuals on the advance of science in the UK and the USA, and very many of the leading names cited as beneficiaries of the ‘Academic Assistance Council’ from 1933 onwards, and the ‘Society for the Protection of Science and Learning’ as it was renamed in 1935 before eventually turning into CARA, represented this extraordinarily creative world. We are familiar with the way in which the providential mixture of generosity and opportunism – embodied most dramatically in Lindemann’s recruiting trips to the Continent in the 30’s – enriched the laboratories of the English-speaking world in a way that helped to guarantee Allied victory in the Second World War and to establish a long-lasting dominance for the UK and the US in physics and related disciplines. Not a legacy without some deep shadows, if we think of the dawn of the atomic age; but a transforming contribution without doubt.

But we perhaps think a little less often of what was contributed to the humanities. Sigmund Freud is hardly less controversial a figure now than when he arrived in London in 1938, but it is hard to think of a more seminal contributor to the cultural map of the western world in the last century. Karl Popper opened the debate around political liberty in a way that still shapes how we imagine the subject – and Isaiah Berlin, though not a thirties refugee, was still unmistakably a displaced European intellectual who brought some of that unsettling broader vision to the very tightly enclosed world of Oxford philosophy. Ernst Gombrich revolutionised the history of art in this country. Personal recollections of Gerd Buchdahl, the philosopher of science, the legal scholar Kurt Lipstein, and Paul Roubiczek, the solitary exponent of existentialism in Cambridge in the sixties, have coloured my own sense of what was contributed to the humanities here by those who had been nurtured intellectually in other climates. To be, however briefly, a colleague of Geoffrey Elton, who transformed the study of Tudor political and constitutional history, was both a formidable experience in itself and a contact with one of the great intellectual clans of German Jewry, the Ehrenbergs. And I, along with many others, especially those associated with King’s College, London, owe an immense debt to Ulrich Simon, a merciless critic of British theological domesticity and one of the first to attempt – as a Jewish convert to Anglicanism – a theological essay on Auschwitz, where most of his family died, in a book which still sobers the reader by its absolute refusal of comforting formulae and of premature forgiveness. And all this is to say nothing of the contribution to the social sciences that was so much more evident in the USA with the advent of figures like Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt. The intellectual climate of the postwar years, up to and including the sixties, would have been unrecognisably different without the impact of these writers on both left and right wing readings of recent history.

There is already a hint here of the kind of contribution such people made to ‘enriching the argument’ of intellectual life in this country, and I want to dwell a few moments longer on this before turning to some thoughts about why and how such matters might be important now. Perhaps the first and most important element in the contribution is simply the reminder that there is nothing automatic about intellectual liberty. Accustomed as we often are in Britain to the idea that our liberties here have evolved according to natural laws and are now so obvious as not to need defending, we are in some real danger of both mythologizing the British psyche and becoming complacent about the state we have arrived at. Intellectual freedom is a deeply political question, and its defence requires some fundamental thinking about the sort of society we are

committed to. That means in turn that we need some diagnostic tools to help us understand the processes by which societies that have had a reasonable level of intellectual freedom become repressive. In short, once we have agreed that intellectual liberty – along with other liberties we associate with democratic or pluralist societies – is not self-evident, we shall have to call upon the resources of philosophy, psychology, social science and literary criticism to equip us for both understanding and defence. And I would add that theology, properly grasped, is also a part of this; though that will need a little more explanation later on.

The academic refugee is not of course invariably a victim of direct persecution because of his or her convictions; but it is clear from the records of the thirties that racial repression was inseparable from ideological repression – as it is clear from experience today that in so many countries the life of academic institutions is deeply vulnerable to political pressure, so that scholars of the ‘wrong’ ethnic group or political allegiance cannot assume that they are safe in their work even if that work is not openly critical of government. The conviction that a healthy and workable society is one in which all groups and individuals have access to public discussion of the public good, and that this entails patience with the expression of diverse perspectives and aspirations, is not universally shared. There are places where it is openly denied and at least as many where it is affirmed in public rhetoric and denied in practice. It is denied by the kind of policies that prevailed in Germany and its satellites in the 1930’s, by the extraordinary abuses of psychiatric medicine to suppress dissent in the USSR in the sixties and seventies, by any regime in which populist pressure, religious or racial, sometimes both, drives government decisions about what can be safely said in public.

But in another sense, it is denied by the sheer facts of a context where the state is either powerless in restraining violence or complicit in it, so that murderous disruption goes unchecked, both urban disorder and communal strife. A substantial number of those who are now recipients of the assistance offered by CARA are less likely than at some past periods to be victims of openly ideological persecution – though this is not unknown: there have been and still are places like Afghanistan under Taliban rule where anything resembling dissident opinion, even in imaginative literature, was prohibited. The most urgent presenting problems seem to be belonging to the wrong ethnic or territorial group (as in Nazi Germany years ago and in parts of Africa and Asia today) and, very significantly, defending the rule of law in such a way that a regime is challenged. The exposure of abuse within legal systems is – as many here tonight know all too well – a major area of mortal risk. Any intellectual in flight from such environments as these acts as a forcible reminder of what human society looks like when the life of the mind is seen as a luxury at best and a threat at worst.

So the refugee intellectual brings into our insular discussion the knowledge that justice is vulnerable and has to be defended against the silencing of discussion and the silencing of particular classes or racial groupings. It is not something that steadily emerges into light as reason advances through the course of history. And there are two interconnected issues that come into focus as a result of this recognition. One is about the need to sustain a culture in which genuine and strong disagreements over the shape of the ‘good’ society are given space to unfold and interact – the need for a robust public intellectual life, supported by a university culture which is not simply harnessed to productivity and problem-solving. CARA exists in large part to help integrate refugee academics into the intellectual as well as the social and political life of this country; it is important for them and for us all that this intellectual life retains its edge and

creativity. The second, closely related, issue is about the need for access to these arguments on the part of *all* citizens. An intellectually lively society nourished by a vigorous and independent academy, appears actually to *presuppose* certain things about universal education and democratic accountability, the imperative to resist the restriction of argument to those already possessed of ideological and material power.

It might be objected, of course, that this formulation itself takes for granted a pluralist and democratic society and thus stifles any discussion of whether society could or should be otherwise – whether absolute monarchy, say, or religious uniformity enforced by law, might be the form of a good society. But the point is that as soon as you are asking whether absolute monarchy is a possibility for a good society, you are granting that it needs to be – and could be – justified. You are allowing that an *argument* could be mounted for absolute monarchy; and this, in one of those tantalising Moebius strips that occasionally arises in philosophical discussion, implies that absolute monarchy is not the only thinkable shape for society – which is already a decisive move away from the historic understanding of absolutism. The twentieth century witnessed the final demise of absolute monarchy in most contexts, but it also witnessed the rise of two of the most powerful counter-attacks ever on the possibility of pluralism, both appealing to the unarguable logic of history – state socialism as embodied in the USSR and the Third Reich. Not enough people noticed the ironies when some of the intellectuals of the ‘free world’ celebrated the end of ideology in the 1950’s and the end of history in the 1990’s. But it is something that both those curious phenomena collapsed rapidly; *argument* re-emerged. And if you now want to mount a defence of Soviet statism or indeed the unanswerable triumph of capitalism after the Cold War, you are free to do so, but your freedom to do so depends on the fact that you live in a society where there is *no* unanswerable case, a society in which there is no political restriction on access to intellectual goods and where the possibility exists of disagreement without public sanction. Which implies, in turn, that history is not going to come to an end any time soon, since every social ‘settlement’ is capable of being challenged and defended, capable of being argued over. If you want a theological reference in the margin here – and I did promise one – you might recall St Augustine’s deep scepticism about any suggestion that this or that social order could be identified with the City of God; history, in his eyes, certainly has a momentum and an overall story, but it is not one that moves inexorably towards the perfect human society. The task of the citizen with Christian conviction is to work for the changes that reflect the justice of God – and always to recognise that such changes can be reversed, in a world of endemic rivalry and acquisition.

The need for ‘argumentative democracy’, as it has been called, is not to be confused with either a passive tolerance for diverse points of view that never engage with each other; nor is it a recipe for a Babel of populist prejudices. The former – as Michael Sandel put it in his excellent recent book, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?*, can mean ‘suppressing moral disagreement rather than actually avoiding it’ (p.268); whereas the ideal situation is neither suppressing nor avoiding but engaging. Engaging, however, is possible only when there is an assumption that it is safe to say what you believe, and that there is a process in which you will be heard, so that any ultimate outcome will have at least registered your own conviction even if it does not endorse it completely. Passive tolerance suggests an underlying nervousness about conviction of any kind and a serious lack of confidence that there are processes and contexts that make disagreement bearable. In fact, it could well be said – though it might sound counter-intuitive – that a society with well-developed civil bonds and a ‘thick texture’ of cultural life can afford

to be more argumentative, even more self-questioning, than one in which the bonding factors are predominantly narrowly legal and rights-oriented. A society in which the social bonds are mostly focused on entitlement will undoubtedly be argumentative in one sense, but it has a lot less chance of being argumentative about the common good. It is a useful reminder that well-functioning and well-resourced neighbourhoods may do more for democracy in its maturest form than any number of regulatory enactments about equality. The rule of law is not the same as an attempt to provide by regulation for every eventuality and every risk. As for the latter point, about avoiding a mere argumentative populism, this simply reminds us that ‘civil’ argument, using that word in its fullest range of meaning, presupposes an education in both reasoning and empathy: if we are to avoid a situation in which the loudest voice wins, we have to find ways of presenting argument as something that is not an end in itself nor a zero-sum game, but a process in which learning is possible.

Defending intellectual freedom, then, is defending the possibility not only of a free academy but of a society willing to learn – and thus a society willing to see itself critically. And what has just been said about civil processes and relationships, and indeed about tradition in its widest sense, helps to emphasise the fact that self-critical intelligence in society or individual is not a constant state of tearing up roots in order to start from scratch but a habit of submitting both individual insight and social practice to various sorts of testing. Is this coherent with itself? Is this truthful to measurable states of affairs in the world, or is it encouraging us to ignore something? Is this a doctrine or a practice that conceals the unchallenged interest of some particular group or person? Because the answers to such questions will tell us something about the *sustainability* of any insight or practice; incoherence, selectivity of attention, unjust exclusion are all of them, so history suggests, among the most deeply destabilising elements in any social order. Repressing these questions in the name of stability is self-destructive. A mature society, which can allow the questions to be asked, is one that is confident of its identity because it is confident of what I have been calling the civil processes of debate and discernment. Once again, we need an account of what is meant by the rule of law that gives full weight to this *positively* critical dimension.

And this is perhaps the moment to note that the vocal anxieties we hear from some quarters about the survival of ‘British identity’ in the face of migrants and refugees betrays a lack of proper confidence in the capacity and the commitment of our society both to learn and to teach; it suggests a confusion about what matters to us and why. In fact it illustrates dramatically why we always need to be alert to argument, because we need to learn how to articulate why we are as we are, and why this or that element of our culture can or should be defended. The presence of the ‘stranger’ is a gift rather than a threat in this context because the stranger helps us see who we are – hopefully, not as an ‘us’ over against a ‘them’, but as an ‘us’ always in process of formation.

If I may be allowed another bit of theology, one of the mainsprings of Christian self-understanding in the formative years of the Church’s life was the idea that the believer was essentially a ‘migrant’, someone who was in any and every situation poised between being at home and being a stranger. In the New Testament and a good deal of the literature that survives from the first couple of Christian centuries, one of the commonest self-descriptions of the Church is in the language that would have been used in the Mediterranean cities for a community of migrant workers, temporary residents. As a ‘resident alien’ in whatever society he or she inhabited, the believer would be involved in discovering what in that society could be endorsed and celebrated and what

should be challenged. The Christian, you could say, was present precisely as someone who was under an obligation to extend or enrich the argument –sometimes indeed to *initiate* the argument about lasting social goods in settings where there was previously no possibility of thinking about what made a social order good or just or legitimate.

In the context of a religiously diverse modern society, something of this role is bound to be played by *all* communities of faith, to the extent that they operate with different ideas of accountability from those that mostly prevail around them; they believe they are accountable to transcendent truths or states of affairs. But it is worth noting how deeply and distinctively this language is embedded in early Christian literature. And this suggests that, if it is the case that the stranger is always necessary to make any society think about itself both critically and hopefully, the believer's role is always, in modern societies, going to show some intriguing parallels with that of the refugee intellectual. Perhaps we may understand the social role of the religious believer more adequately if we think of it in terms of extending or enriching argument, offering resources for thinking about social pluralism rather than either deploring it or reducing it to the passive tolerance I mentioned earlier. Awareness in 1930's Britain of the severity of the political crisis on the continent of Europe owed a good deal to some of the bishops of the Church of England, in particular Hensley Henson of Durham, a passionate early supporter of refugees from the Third Reich, an outspoken voice in the Lords on behalf of Europe's Jews and the one of the leaders of the campaign to prevent British academics taking part in the celebrations of Heidelberg University's anniversary in 1936; and of course the great George Bell of Chichester. Neither was a political philosopher or even a major constructive theologian, for all their many gifts; but both represent the willingness of Christians to speak clearly both for the imperatives of justice towards the persecuted and for the need to welcome those fleeing from persecution. Both took their stand against complacency and in favour of some of the risk of being a hospitable society for strangers. I don't think I am alone in seeing them as touchstones for the integrity of Christian witness in twentieth century Britain; and it makes sense to celebrate them alongside those whose future here they helped to secure, to celebrate them as exemplary voices for the Christian calling to behave as 'resident aliens'.

But, to sum up, it will by now be clear that to speak of the contribution of the refugee intellectual as 'enriching the argument' is a very deliberate choice of words. This contribution works at several levels. At its simplest, as we have seen, it reminds us that in a fragile world there is always an argument to be had about society and the social good, given that the liberty to raise fundamental questions about the legitimacy and justice of social arrangements is not to be taken for granted. At a somewhat different level, it ought also to have the effect of making us look afresh at what our own society makes possible – and making us ask why exactly this has evolved.

Britain has often been seen by those who have been welcomed here as combining a fairly hospitable pluralism with a fairly strong level of civic and cultural bonding. With varying degrees of exasperation and admiration, observers from elsewhere have noted the interweaving of a generally liberal political settlement with strong traditions clothing the monarchy and the law with ceremony and granting some public role to religion. It does no harm for us to be 'made strange' to ourselves, prompted to ask what the history is that has made all this possible, so that, at least, we may have a better idea of what most needs nourishing or conserving in our culture. There is no ground for complacency about British society having an 'essentially tolerant' character; we are no

more exempt from the risks of political and ideological change than any other society. But to see ourselves from outside, and to learn to be surprised (as well as grateful) at where we find ourselves, can be a salutary moment in our own political education. Arguments are enriched when people join in who don't initially share a group's story but learn the language well enough to bring to it something fresh. And, ideally, the outcome is a fabric in which some very diverse strands come together: an articulate seriousness about alternative visions of the human good, brought into sharp focus by political crisis or repression, and, on the other hand, a tradition of communal patience and diversity within which these alternative visions can be sifted and criticised. In his lecture for CARA's 75th anniversary (*Nazi Persecution – Britain's Gift: A Personal Reflection*), Dr Ralph Kohn quotes Hans Krebs on his experience in Cambridge, where he saw colleagues 'argue without quarrelling, quarrel without suspecting, suspect without abusing, criticise without vilifying or ridiculing, and praise without flattering'. It is a generous tribute (perhaps a little rose-coloured, some graduates even of Cambridge might think), but it captures something very significant. It tells us that what we take for granted may in the light of history and contemporary politics be in fact rather remarkable; and because it is remarkable it needs to be understood as best we can understand; and in that understanding we may discover better how to secure its future in a world which is not noticeably safer for the champions of intellectual liberty than it was in the thirties. In such a world, CARA's work in continuing to offer basic care and security for critical 'strangers' is part of its service to the health and freedom of our own common life.

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