

## SECULARISM: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

I thank Archbishop Cushley, President of the Commission, Mgr. Poniskaitis, the Vice-President, Fr. Nick Welsh and all of you for inviting me to speak this morning. The topic is: *Secularism: What does it mean to be human?* In this paper I am going to argue that secularism is based on a flawed anthropology that cannot lead to authentic human flourishing. There are three parts: first, the concept of secularism, then, its flawed anthropology, and finally, how as Christians, as Catholics, we might respond.

### 1. Secularism

What is secularism? To begin with a couple of general, philosophical observations. In a number of his essays from the 1960s, Bernard Lonergan, the great twentieth century Jesuit philosopher, discusses the tectonic shift in Western culture that developed with the Enlightenment in the late-seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The classical culture was a fusion of Christianity with the wisdom of Greece and Rome; it reached its zenith in the gothic High Middle Ages. But from the seventeenth century, he argued, classical culture began to be overlaid with a new culture, modernity, based on empirical science and technology, on liberty, equality and democracy. What Lonergan at the time did not foresee was how modernity itself would be overlaid with a further development, post-modernity, through the so-called ‘Second Enlightenment’ of 1968<sup>2</sup>. Lonergan paints with broad brushstrokes, but the typology is helpful to bear in mind: classicism, modernity and post-modernity.

Lonergan was influenced in his thinking by the English historian Christopher Dawson, who saw religion as the soul of culture, what gave it hidden depth and vitality. A civilisation that loses its spiritual roots dies.<sup>3</sup> Dawson divided Western culture into Protestant and Catholic. Protestant cultures, he argued, were bourgeois: they prized efficiency, procedures, organisation and economic success. Catholic cultures exalted the erotic: imagination and desire, spiritual perfection, passion and art.<sup>4</sup> Protestant cultures tended towards the mechanical, Catholic to the human. Dawson too is painting with broad brushstrokes, but his linkage of religion and culture and his typology of post-Protestant cultures and post-Catholic cultures is again helpful to bear in mind.

Over the last 50 years with the advent of postmodernity, Britain, like other European countries, has quietly undergone a religious revolution, a shift comparable in its historical significance to the Reformation. Alongside untold advances in medical care, material

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, ‘The Transition from a Classicist World View to Historical Mindedness,’ ‘Belief: Today’s Issue,’ ‘Theology and Man’s Future,’ ‘The Absence of God in Modern Culture,’ ‘The Future of Christianity,’ ‘The Response of the Jesuit as Priest and Apostle in the Modern World,’ and ‘Revolution in Catholic Theology,’ in *Volume 13 Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan. A Second Collection*, ed. R. Doran and J. Dadasky (Toronto: Toronto University Press: 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See J. Cardinal Ratzinger *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2004)

<sup>3</sup> C. Dawson *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry* (London, Sheed and Ward: 1929).

<sup>4</sup> See C. Dawson *The Dynamics of World History* edited by J. J. Molloy (La Salle, Sherwood, Sugden and Co.: 1978) pp. 203-8.

wealth, leisure and comfort, Britain has become ‘secular,’ a land of mass unbelief. The British have largely lost their faith. They have dropped their Christian beliefs, church connections and religious practices. Millions live, to use the Scholastic phrase, *etsi Deus non daretur*, ‘as if there is no God.’ A recent British Social Attitudes Survey confirms that 48% of the population say they are ‘nones,’ people of no religion, meaning anything from atheism or agnosticism to humanism and indifference.<sup>5</sup>

The terms, secular, secularism and secularisation, are ill-defined and often watery. In part, this is because secularism is more of an attitude or lifestyle than a fully-fledged system of thought or philosophy. Essentially, secularism means a concern with the *saeculum*, the ‘age’, and so by extension the world, *this* world, the here and now rather than the next.<sup>6</sup> Secularism is about living life horizontally, without God, without the vertical dimension of religion, without the ‘sacred canopy.’<sup>7</sup> Secularism permits religion but brackets it off; it ring-fences it to the private domain. It separates Church and State, religion and politics. Whilst most people are tolerant – live and let live - some, such as *Stonewall* and *The National Secular Society*, seek to exclude religious expression from schools, institutions and public life: not freedom of religion but freedom from religion. But in general, policy makers adopt a neutral attitude toward religion as long as believers keep the law. Religion - the meaning of life, values about self, sexuality and the family, what is morally right, the existence of God and life after death - is ring-fenced and treated as a private affair.

Sociologists explore this. Steve Bruce develops a ‘secularisation paradigm’ based on statistics from national censuses, arguing that church membership has been in decline since the nineteenth century. For him, the demise of religion is an inevitable bi-product of modernity.<sup>8</sup> Callum Brown, in his *The Death of Christian Britain*, agrees but argues that the decline became a spectacular collapse after the cultural, social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> The ‘Swinging Sixties’ saw the emergence of youth-culture, the music of the Beatles (1962), the contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women’s liberation movement (1968), easier divorce and so on, all leading subsequently to the demise of the traditional family. Brown correlates the decline of Christianity and church membership with the changing social status of women, and with new attitudes towards sex, fertility, education and work.

Secularism takes different forms in different countries<sup>10</sup> and Dawson’s distinction between post-Catholic and post-Protestant can be helpful. Yet paradoxically, religion is often not far away: scratch the surface and water wells up. After the 2010 papal visit to Britain, Pope Benedict XVI remarked how strong he found the Christian heritage to be

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<sup>5</sup> See S. Bullivant *Catholic Research Forum Reports 3: The ‘No Religion’ Population of Britain* (London, St. Mary’s University Twickenham: 2016).

<sup>6</sup> In English, the term ‘secular’ was popularised by the Victorian social reformer George Holyoake, although the concept goes back much further. For more about George Holyoake (1817-1906), see the website of the National Secular Society: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/george-jacob-holyoake.html> (May 2021)

<sup>7</sup> See R. Fischella *The New Evangelisation: Responding to the Challenge of Indifference* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2012), especially 25-48. Cf. P. Berger *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Doubleday: 1967)

<sup>8</sup> See S. Bruce *Religion in Modern Britain* ((Oxford University Press: 1995) and *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, Blackwell: 2012).

<sup>9</sup> C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001). See also C. Brown *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, Bloomsbury: 2017)

<sup>10</sup> See G. Davie *The Sociology of Religion. A Critical Agenda* (London, Sage: 2013 second edition)

and how his visit had brought to the surface many religious sentiments. He was convinced that the ancient nations of Europe have Christian souls, one with the ‘genius’ and history of the respective peoples.<sup>11</sup> In Britain, freedom of speech and political affiliation, respect for the rule of law, a sense of equality and of individual rights and duties are all deeply Christian. Indeed, Christian beliefs still surface on public occasions, at weddings and at funerals. The sociologist Grace Davie argues that whilst church attendance has collapsed, Christian beliefs still remain. She calls this ‘believing but not belonging;’ the Brits are unchurched but they are not non-believers.<sup>12</sup> Graeme Smith, another scholar, disagrees. To him, most people do not believe, but they do still largely hold to Christian ethics. Britain for him is a Christian ethics society; Christian ethics frame the culture.<sup>13</sup>

Globally, since 9/11, the political dimension of religion has become more evident. If in Western Europe, Christianity is in decline, elsewhere in the world, it is in the ascendant, Islam too, and also Buddhism. Easier travel, the internet, social media make the world smaller, with greater interaction between peoples. Europe has experienced substantial immigration, with a supermarket of religions on everyone’s doorstep. Today, most of the larger urban centres are thoroughly multicultural and thus quietly multi-religious. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, Mass attendance has remained stable because the Anglo-Irish, now mostly lapsed, have been replaced by Keralans, Filipinos and Nigerians.

Are the British, and are Europeans still religious deep down? Beneath the layers of secular postmodern culture, are there, in Dawson’s sense, hidden springs animating the culture? Or have the religious wells dried up as the statistics suggest? Or is the situation more complex? It looks like a desert, but there are oases, with lively evangelical churches and Catholic groups alongside Islamic communities. The Belgian sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger goes further. She argues that religion is now widespread across many domains of human life. New surrogate forms of religion have emerged, embedded in secular concerns like environmentalism, charity work, football teams with their corporate identities, logos and mascots.<sup>14</sup> Is climate-change activism the new religion, or *Black Lives Matter*, or campaigns for gay and transgender rights?

## 2. Flawed Anthropology

The thesis here is that secularism is flawed, unsustainable and ultimately destructive of human flourishing. It is founded on a theological error, the denial of God and living as if God does not exist. By removing religion from everyday life, secularism deprives people of the spiritual resources they need. Religious education is replaced by comparative

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI *General Audience* Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 22 September 2010: available on-line at [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100922.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100922.html) (May 2021)

<sup>12</sup> G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994)

<sup>13</sup> G. Smith *A Short History of Secularism* (London, Tauris: 2010)

<sup>14</sup> “For all the evidence of the fragmentation of religion in modern society, it has to be recognized that religion still makes itself heard, though not always where one expects to hear it. It makes its presence felt implicitly or invisibly throughout the gamut of human expression. Thus instead of thinking of a dwindling religious domain (the institutions of traditional religion) set against the domains of politics, aesthetics, therapy and so on, one should look for covert religion in every sphere of human activity” D. Hervieu-Léger *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Jersey, Rutgers UP: 2000) 29

religion, leaving students with no experiential knowledge of Europe's Christian heritage.<sup>15</sup> In Britain, there are now high levels of religious illiteracy. Unsurprisingly, during the COVID-crisis, spiritual and religious needs were marginalised. In the first lockdown, the Prime Minister joined churches and places of worship to "shops selling non-essential goods."<sup>16</sup> Yet human beings have spiritual as well as bodily needs and these are intimately connected with their mental, psychological and emotional well-being. More, for Catholics, churches are not simply 'places of worship' where the community gathers. Churches symbolise Christ who feeds, teaches and shepherds His flock, renewing them with Word and Sacrament and sending them out on mission and service.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, secularism erroneously disconnects morality from religion. Religion grounds ethics and so a loss of religion dissolves the foundations of morality. Without religion and the natural law, novel concepts of right and wrong, of sexuality and family-life, of the dignity and value of human life, emerge. To lose God is to lose man, as St. John Paul II put it;<sup>18</sup> without religion, humans no longer see themselves as humble creatures but as Promethean creators. Yet misleadingly, secularism is not *wertfrei*, value-free. It adopts the ethical beliefs of humanism with its strong, liberal values. These include the Golden Rule ('do unto others as you would have them do unto you'),<sup>19</sup> a concern for justice, equality, respect for all, regardless of race, gender and disability, the recognition of all sexualities, the freedom to determine fertility and to make up a family, a woman's right to choose an abortion and the right to assisted suicide ('dignity in dying').<sup>20</sup> Humanism esteems being 'good without God.' Many of these values, of course, are post-Christian values, although now freewheeling, detached from their theological moorings.

Thirdly, the disconnection of morality and religion in turn undermines the social, leading to individualism and the 'dictatorship of relativism.'<sup>21</sup> Relativism is the view that truth is

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<sup>15</sup> In Britain, while new minority religions have been accommodated, Christianity, the religion of the majority, has been demoted to one possibility among others. As an example, take the word 'equality.' In its 2013 document *Religion or Belief and the Workplace* the Equalities and Human Rights Commission fails to differentiate between religion on the one hand, and personal life-style choices on the other. This is typical of a secular approach, in which every religion and every choice is treated as absolutely identical and of absolutely equal value. Consequently, vegetarianism, environmentalism, even wearing a beard, are equated with classic religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. This is not only offensive to members of those religions, but it expresses an absolutist view of equality: that equality means sameness, not complementarity and difference. In the document, the religion of a tiny minority, Druidism, is valued identically with the religion of the majority, Christianity, and thus disproportionately. Yet, it is an historical fact that the core of British values are based not on Druidism, but on Christianity. See Equality and Human Rights Commission *Equality or Belief in the Workplace: An Explanation of Recent European Court of Human Rights Judgments* (2013) available online at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/religion-or-belief-workplace-explanation-recent-european-court-human-rights> (May 2021)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020> (May 2021)

<sup>17</sup> As the Second Preface for the Dedication of a Church puts it: "Here you build up for yourself the temple that we are and cause your Church .. to grow ever more and more as the Lord's own Body, till she reaches her fullness in the vision of peace, the heavenly city of Jerusalem." See *The Roman Missal. English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, CTS: 2010) 1285.

<sup>18</sup> See John Paul II *Redemptor Hominis* (London, CTS: 1979)

<sup>19</sup> Mark 12:28-29; cf. Tob 4: 16

<sup>20</sup> See C. Brown *Becoming Atheist* 171f.

<sup>21</sup> In 2005, in a homily at Mass to the cardinals who had come to Rome to elect the new pope, the then Cardinal Ratzinger, said: "Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine", seems the only attitude [appropriate to] modern times. Yet [in this] we are building a dictatorship of relativism that recognizes nothing as definitive, and whose ultimate goal consists solely in one's own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of

relative: what is true for you is not true for me. Because truth has no basis in religion or the natural law, it depends on what I think or feel. Dictatorship arises when the State endorses one group's claims over another's. This can be seen in debates about abortion, gay marriage and assisted suicide. What is right is determined by campaign groups who successfully persuade legislators. European legal systems were moulded over many centuries by Christianity and the natural law, yet today, they are crafted by pressure-groups, politicians and lawmakers, educators, health-care professionals, media and business interests, for whom inherited values are less absolute. They lobby for what is expedient - or for what they can get away with. The law is now increasingly adrift, whilst an ever-rising tide of bureaucratic rules and regulations is enforced that express the will of the legislator, the will of campaigners and the will of a focus group. As Michael Nazir-Ali has argued, when public ethics are determined this way, people become enslaved, family life is undermined, the rights of religious people are circumscribed and the weak, the unborn child, the elderly and the dying victimised.<sup>22</sup> A growing totalitarianism in secular societies is inevitable as the loss of faith dissolves the foundations of ethics.<sup>23</sup>

Fourthly, secularism employs a flawed epistemology. As St. John Paul II argued in *Fides et Ratio*, the demise of religion leads to the demise of reason.<sup>24</sup> Without a religion to trust, many turn to science, investing an exaggerated trust in scientific reasoning. Forgive the technicality of this argument, but empirical science intentionally circumscribes and excludes both the data of revelation and the data of consciousness, in favour of the data of sense: what is observable and measurable.<sup>25</sup> Even though science has been enormously successful and beneficial, human flourishing is not limited to the data of sense, the empirical, observable and measurable. God can never be an object in that sense, nor can the inner personal world of human experiences, feelings, memories, likes and dislikes, personal choices and decisions – all that make up daily life and happiness. Scientism is an exaggerated trust in scientific reasoning over and against other forms of human reasoning, especially philosophy and theology. It is a false belief: that science gives solid truth, whereas religion – and everything else - is a matter of mushy opinion.

Fifthly, the dichotomy between the private and public expression of religion is destructive of human liberty. Religious belief naturally seeks expression. Secularism acts as a pseudo-religion, yet it lacks the solidity of a religion; it cannot replace religion, in Dawson's sense, as an authentic basis for culture. It is too flimsy to sustain the long-won achievements of European civilisation. Instead, it is producing societies and nations

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true humanism." See: *Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice: Homily of Card. Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals Vatican Basilica Monday 18 April 2005*, on-line [www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html) (May 2021).

<sup>22</sup> M. Nazir-Ali *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism* (London, Bloomsbury: 2012) 32.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, on a visit to the Vatican in 2012, Baroness Warsi, notably a Muslim, said that Europe needed to become more confident in its Christian identity in order to encourage a greater social cohesion: "... [To] encourage social harmony, people need to feel stronger in their religious identities, more confident in their beliefs. ... Too often there is a suspicion of faith in our continent, where signs of religion cannot be displayed or worn in government buildings, where ... faith is sidelined, marginalised and downgraded. It all hinges on a basic misconception: That somehow to create equality and space for minority faiths and cultures, we need to erase our majority religious heritage." (slightly adapted). See [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-speech-in-the-holy-see](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-speech-in-the-holy-see) (May 2021).

<sup>24</sup> See John Paul II *Faith and Reason: Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio* (London, CTS: 1998), especially n. 46

<sup>25</sup> See P. Egan *Philosophy and Theology: A Primer* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press: 2009) 41-45

without foundations, societies based on legal precedent and political expediency, societies with ever greater surveillance and state-control. At the risk of being controversial, take Ireland as an example. Until recently, it was a nation characterised by its Catholic faith and religious culture, by the ‘vertical’ dimension of life, so to speak. Today Ireland is marketed for the ‘horizontal:’ for its lush greenery, the shamrock, its folk music and the national drink, *Guinness*. Secularism in Ireland has fostered a collective amnesia of the past and an intentional eclipse of its Christian foundations.

And lastly, spirituality and religion are intrinsic to being human. The question of God will never go away.<sup>26</sup> Every human being aspires to be happy, to be loved, to belong, to live forever. Humans are built for this, and, as St. Augustine once said, none of this is possible without a relationship with God.<sup>27</sup> This is where Christianity can respond to humanity’s deepest longings. It offers friendship with Christ, promises immortality, gives community within His Body the Church. It provides the grace, energy and power to do the impossible, to bear sickness, suffering, sadness, death. It gives meaning and purpose; it grounds ethics; it builds community; it encourages self-sacrifice and service of the poor. It offers the glue that fosters social cohesion. Again, the COVID-crisis has brought this to the fore. In demonstrating the fragility of much of modern living, the pandemic has made people review their priorities and values, the meaning of life and death, the role of religion. Care of the poor, concern for the sick and the elderly, and the future for the young, have become central. The word “prayer” as an internet search has surged. Thousands have tuned into online Masses, including marginal Catholics and others.

### 3. Response

The Church’s most effective response to secularism is surely the new evangelisation Pope John Paul II called for, an evangelisation, “new in its ardour, new in its methods, and new in its expression.”<sup>28</sup> Believers themselves need a renewed ardour, a new passion for Christ, so that they will naturally reach out in service and mission to others. This includes new methods, new ways of communicating the Gospel, the use of new media, new art and new approaches. New evangelisation is not a programme or a form of catechesis;<sup>29</sup> it is about enabling others to have a transforming encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ within His Body the Church, above all, in the Holy Eucharist.<sup>30</sup>

Christians urgently need to study secularism, to engage with its proponents, especially the humanists, to expose its flaws and its flimsiness. In its place, the Church must propose

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<sup>26</sup> For a succinct argument in demonstration of this, see B. Lonergan *Method in Theology Volume 14 Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. R. Doran and J. Dadasky (Toronto: Toronto University Press: 2017) 96-99.

<sup>27</sup> “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine *Confessions* Lib 1, 1-2, 2.5, 5 (CSEL 33, 1-5). This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the Ninth Sunday of the Year.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II “The Task of the Latin American Bishop”, Address to CELAM, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1983; English translation in *Origins* 12 (4 March 1983) 659-62.

<sup>29</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation *Directory for Catechesis* (London, CTS: 2020) 28, 48-54, 55-60, 218, 272

<sup>30</sup> “We are ... not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and by the assurance he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new programme’”. John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 29, text available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) (May 2021).

its own authentic humanism, demonstrating how it is able to ground a free, democratic and pluralist society. Theologians must demonstrate the existence of God, countering the new atheism of Richard Dawkins and others.<sup>31</sup> They must construct arguments to overturn popular myths about science and to shew science and religion as complementary. They must engage with hot-button issues such as climate change, racial justice and gender ideology, using them to proclaim the *kerygma* and to manifest Catholicism as an attractive, alternative option linked to a natural, simpler way of life. In this regard, the pandemic has opened up an opportunity. The COVID-crisis has exposed the limitations of the secular and led many to discuss what sort of post-COVID world they wish their children to inhabit. Pope Francis has given a lead here with his recent book *Let us Dream* and the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, calling for a new world economic order with fraternity and a truly human ecology.<sup>32</sup> Other helpful Vatican documents include the 2019 Congregation for Catholic Education guide *Male and Female He Created Them* and the recent Pontifical Biblical Commission study *What is Man?*<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude. The Church in its two-thousand-year history has never before engaged with a secular culture. It presents a huge challenge. It is making the Church in Europe much smaller. In the past, what counted were statistics, the numbers of parishes and schools, the growing size of the Christian community, its weight. Now what counts is holiness, commitment, enthusiasm, the clarity of witness, teaching and leadership. Today, to be Catholic is to be totally counter-cultural and at times, evangelisation can seem like flogging a dead horse. Yet, Europe *is* a fertile mission-field. Dig through the topsoil and water wells up, even if dirty. The harvest is rich. Here in Britain, despite the vanguard of liberal, secular activists, it is rare to encounter direct hostility. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6) and at this moment, the Holy Spirit is at work in human hearts wooing them towards Him. It is not the ‘product’ that is defective but the ability of people within a busy, consumer culture to hear God’s call. As Catholics, it is our task to break through and to communicate Jesus Christ so that everyone can find their way to Him and to that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long.

Thank you for listening.

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<sup>31</sup> For a helpful overview of this, see ‘The New Atheists’ in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (IEP): online at <https://iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/> (May 2021)

<sup>32</sup> See Pope Francis *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London, Simon and Shuster: 2020) and Pope Francis *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (London, CTS: 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *Male and Female He Created Them. Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (London, CTS: 2021) and Pontifical Biblical Commission *What is Man? A Journey through Biblical Anthropology* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd: 2021)