**Wilberforce Address 8th December 2015**

**Faith, Freedom and One Nation**

I would like to start by thanking the Conservative Christian Fellowship for the kind invitation to deliver the 2015 Wilberforce Address this evening.

It is an honour to be asked to give this lecture which is named of course after one of our Party’s most important social reformers – a passionate and untiring campaigner, and someone who embodied the very spirit of Compassionate Conservativism.

William Wilberforce continues to fascinate and inspire in so many ways.  His achievements and his importance within British politics and the Conservative Party are things we rightly continue to recognise and salute.

It is a particular privilege to address you in this the twenty fifth anniversary year of the founding of the Conservative Christian Fellowship and I congratulate you on reaching this very significant milestone – a quarter of a century of bringing Christians together, from all backgrounds and denominations, in friendship and faith, to provide a forum of shared interest and identity within the Conservative Party.

Founded by two young Conservative radicals at Exeter University, one now a senior Member of Parliament – David Burrowes, the other now a columnist for the Times newspaper – Tim Montgomerie, the CCF quickly became a substantial membership organisation with a distinctive voice within the wider Party.

Along with their two university housemates, Robert Halfon and Sajid Javid, both of whom are now also MPs and indeed fellow members of the Cabinet, these friends were part of an exciting generation of young thinkers and campaigners, encompassing different faiths and none, determined to shape the future of Conservatism and the purpose and direction of our Party. The Conservative Christian Fellowship was a product and direct expression of that.

So these were the first four members of the CCF twenty five years ago – 50% Christian, 25% Jewish, 25% Muslim. While the Fellowship has always had, at its heart, core Christian doctrine and principles, from the very start it has looked outwards in a spirit of friendship and openness.

It quite rightly never made any claim that the Conservative Party is somehow a more natural political home for Christians than any other party, but one of its central purposes has been to demonstrate how Christians have influenced the Party over centuries, through figures such as Wilberforce, and to show how some of the core Conservative instincts and values are entirely consistent with a Christian understanding of the relationship between the individual, community and the state.

It was actually twenty years ago this autumn that I first came into contact with the CCF, having newly arrived in this city fresh from Bristol University to join the ranks of one of London’s most ancient diaspora groups, the Welsh.

My paths soon crossed with those of Tim Montgomerie, by then a very promising Bank of England analyst, who in his spare time was leading and growing the CCF with enormous energy and vision, and who challenged me to think deeper about my politics and my faith.

I had managed to get through the whole of my university years without the diversions of student politics but I was impressed by Tim’s intellectual and spiritual confidence. I remember an argument with him one evening down the road at the Red Lion pub which resulted in him persuading me to join the Conservative Christian Fellowship… my very first entry into the Conservative Party family.

And so it began….

My theme this evening is Faith, Freedom and One Nation.

It brings together a number of thoughts which I have had for some time, but which have been sharpened by some of the challenging events we have seen in recent days. It is also quite timely given the issues raised yesterday in the report from the wonderfully Victorian sounding Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life which sought to address issues of community, diversity and the common good.

Among the reactions of anger, grief, fear and sorrow that came pouring out into public in the hours following the Paris attacks on the night of Friday 13th November, one of the most powerful was a declaration of solidarity and unity – linked to a declaration that our shared values are stronger than the bullets and suicide vests of those driven by the poison and rage of Islamist extremism – and that these shared values will ultimately prevail.

Millions of people took to social media to share this message. Many users of Twitter and Facebook changed their profile pictures to include a French flag to demonstrate their solidarity with the people of France who had been subjected to a second murderous assault in less than a year.

A few days later one of our most prominent political commentators, the BBC’s Andrew Neil, opened his programme ‘This Week’ with a blistering critique of the terrorists and a powerful statement of where the balance of history lies:

“Well I can’t say I fancy their chances…. the outcome is pretty clear to everybody … Whatever atrocities you are currently capable of committing, you will lose. In a thousand years’ time, Paris, that glorious city of lights, will still be shining bright as will every other city like it. While you will be as dust.”

The assertion and underlying assumption here is that our values, our traditions of free speech, tolerance, our essential freedoms which allow lovers to dance together on a Friday night in Paris, families to eat and laugh together in restaurants, artists to paint mocking cartoons of political and religious figures… the assertion is that this type of society – this civilization – will endure in the face of a unprecedented wave of terror generated by the modern day phenomenon of global jihadism.

But how safe is this assumption that the victory of our values over the forces of hate and intolerance is self-evident and inevitable?

I think it is worth asking the question.

But to ask the question properly requires an understanding of what values exactly do we believe constitute the core freedoms that we cherish. I call these our ‘freedom values’.

One of the responses from governments to the Paris attacks has been an immediate increase in security activity and cooperation – within our own shores and across Europe, and also following the vote last Wednesday the projection of force into Syria where much of the terror is inspired and coordinated.

But alongside this, I argue, is a need to reassess and reassert our fundamental freedom values.

I believe an essential part of our armoury in the fight against ISIS/Daesh and their ideology – as with every other previous fascist threat – will be our clarity and strength of purpose when it comes to our own values, our own beliefs.

Because in the same way that jihadist militant groups take advantage of the ungoverned and bombed out spaces of cities and towns wracked by civil war, so they smell opportunity in what they see as societies whose values and core unifying beliefs have been hollowed-out or are contested. Hence one of the key objectives of their terror attacks in Europe is of course to sow those seeds of social, cultural and religious division.

Any failure on our part to articulate clearly our core values, or any lack of willingness in defending them in a muscular and committed way within our own shores, is proof, so they believe, of our decadence and the superiority of their twisted ideology and inevitability of their ultimate victory – in this life or whatever they consider comes next.

Articulating our core freedom values actually should not be difficult.

Many people know broadly what they are, or instinctively feel they kind of know what they are – free movement, free speech, and so on.

They are those freedoms and rights that are enunciated in 1948 in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. This charter set out, for the first time, those fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

These are the liberties and freedoms which together provide the basis for a good and happy society. They are our essential freedoms – which allow us to express all of our fullness and dignity as human beings. And we rightly cherish them.

And right there in the middle of the Universal Declaration is Article 18 which protects freedom of thought and religion.

It is the cornerstone, I believe, of this essential package of freedoms, because it goes to the heart, I believe, of who we are as human beings.

It reflects the fact that as human beings we are wired to have core beliefs, to have conscience, to be people of faith – and also that we have the free will and the capacity to convert or change our beliefs…  and even to lose faith altogether.

Article 18 includes the freedom to change one’s religion or beliefs, and goes on to say that people have the fundamental right, “either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his/her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

So it is not merely a freedom to have a private set of beliefs but a right to be publicly part of a faith community practising and working out that faith in the context of community. The Universal Declaration absolutely recognises that.

Because that is one of the curious aspects of so many faiths and religions – the public dimension to it. As well as being intimately personal – how each of us individually approach the big questions of existence and eternity – faith is also a corporate thing and an expression of community.

Churches, chapels, temples, synagogues, mosques, Friends Meeting Houses, fellowships… across so many religions the language of ‘togetherness’ is at the heart of the practice of faith.  It is about bringing people together from out of the privacy of their homes into a more public environment. Faith is something that is done in private but also together.

And in my own experience, the best kind of churches bring people together from all backgrounds. You worship alongside people who don’t necessarily look like you, think like you, have a lifestyle like you. This is an expression of true community. An expression, if you like, of One Nation.

But as we can see so easily around the world there is nothing ‘universal’ about this right of freedom to practice faith in private and in public – or any of the other rights in in the UN Charter.

In fact they are openly and sometimes brutally flouted by a great many illiberal and undemocratic regimes and non-state actors. Organisations like the excellent CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) and Open Doors work hard to shine a spotlight onto examples of persecution and intolerance towards Christians and people of other faiths all around the world.

But what about within our own nation?

Well, we should remain extremely thankful that we face nothing like the pressures, restrictions and persecution so many Christians around the world face on a daily basis.  It is estimated than an average of at least 180 Christians around the world are killed each month for their faith – and the current violence suffered by Christians in Nigeria at the hands of Boko Haram or in some Indian states with the growth of a radicalised Hindu nationalism is frightening.

Christians in this country face none of this.

But Britain in 2015 is, nevertheless, increasingly characterised I believe by a creeping intolerance towards Christianity, and towards religion more generally, which we should be deeply concerned about.

There is a strain of hard-edged secularism at work which seeks to push faith entirely into the realms of the private and away from the public space.  It is illiberal and is fundamentally at odds with the values we proclaim provide the foundation for a free and open society.

Just a week following the Paris attacks, in act of enormous ignorance and intolerance, the agency that handles advertising for the major UK cinema chains refused to show an advert featuring the Lord’s Prayer. The 60-second film, to be screened UK-wide, featured Christians from all walks of life reciting the prayer, including refugees, a sheep farmer, and even the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Despite being approved by the British Board of Film Classification and the Cinema Advertising Authority, the agency refused the advert on the grounds that it, I quote, ‘could cause offence to those of differing political persuasions, as well as those of differing faiths and indeed no faith’. The Church of England derided the claim as ‘plain silly’, warning that it limited free speech. The Church’s chief legal adviser even suggested that the agency’s actions may contravene the Equality Act, which bans commercial organisations from refusing services on religious grounds.

Even figures like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Fry, not known for always riding to the defence of Christians, criticised the decision, recognising it for the illiberal act it was.

But I believe this incident reflects a broader shift within our society which places of one of core freedoms – that is freedom of religion – under threat.

The freedom to have faith, to publicly live in accordance with faith, to share faith… even where that means allowing people the freedom to make exclusive claims to truth, no matter how objectionable, is being corroded by this creeping intolerance towards religion.

We now live in a society where a great many people believe they cannot wear public displays of their faith in the workplace (maybe a small cross or the sign of the fish on their clothing) because it would cause offence or maybe because it could be somehow illegal.

We live in a society where some headteachers now believe that the correct response to a complaint from a parent about references to Christianity in the school’s Christmas activities is to bring an end to generations of tradition and only permit activities which remove the Christian dimension to the festival.

All across society... hundreds of decisions being taken week after week at an individual, corporate or community level that have the cumulative effect of pushing faith to the margins, squeezing it out of the mainstream, de-legitimizing it.

Some used to call this kind of stuff political correctness. That is actually not what I am talking about.

I actually think there is some strong truth in a worldview which emphasises taking care with how we use language in describing people for instance. I don’t want to live in a society where it is considered OK to casually use phrases and words which demean and belittle people because of the colour of their skin or if they have a disability.  We absolutely should take care not to cause offence with our words.

When the offence is supposedly caused by a reference or statement about Christian beliefs, or those of any other faith, then there is something deeper going on.

In the same way that religions can be distorted and twisted – and we are rightly suspicious of narrow Christian sects or Islamist extremist teachings which depart from widely accepted doctrine – so we should be on our guard as a society against a brand of secularism which is a vehicle for its own kind of intolerance.

This hard-edged secularism has created an enormous chilling effect across many spheres of life, including in the workplace, when it comes to people feeling able to speak openly about faith and religion.  I see this effect in my own workplace too – in politics.

I have never found it easy as a politician to talk about my faith. In an age where every word is watched for something that can be construed as a gaffe, off-message or representing some bigoted or irrational attitude, it is a topic which many of us steer clear of.  It kind of makes life simpler.

And as for the topic of personal prayer, well that’s become a total no-go-area – even though the phrase “our thoughts and prayers are with \_\_\_\_\_\_” appears in so many of the statements or tweets we all put out in response to any form of tragedy or suffering.

To speak openly as a Christian politician about praying is really asking for trouble. Just ask Tim Farron or Tony Blair.

The suspicion is that you might not be in full possession of your rational and intellectual faculties when making important decisions, especially when it comes to matters of life and death. War, for instance.

As a new backbencher in 2005 I remember feeling ashamed of some of my Conservative colleagues for openly mocking Tony Blair in the House of Commons over reports that he had prayed in the run up to the invasion of Iraq.

Prayer does not stop you making bad decisions, of course, sometimes spectacularly bad decisions, and it does not absolve you of personal responsibility. But the idea that a political leader might somehow outsource their own decision-making faculties, and suspend rational reasoning, through the act of prayer is regarded as highly dangerous. (Not that that is actually what prayer is about.)

Every day when the House of Commons is sitting MPs gather together in the Chamber for two minutes before the TV cameras flicker on, and before members of the public shuffle into the Strangers Gallery, for an act of scripture reading and prayer led by the Speaker’s Chaplain. This tradition started sometime around the start of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign in the sixteenth century and the basic prayer has remained the same:

"Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and her government, to Members of Parliament and all in positions of responsibility, the guidance of your Spirit. May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed. Amen."

It’s a wonderfully simple and direct prayer. It is of course a prayer for guidance; a prayer for help in staying focused on making good decisions not tainted by self-interest or prejudice or anything other than the common good as best we understand it.

So every day MPs collectively gather for this prayer followed by the Lords’ Prayer.  It is a ritual, sure. A tradition. Part of the fabric of House of Commons life. Attending these prayers also happens to be the way you reserve your seat on the green benches for a particular day. But it is still a really important moment which many MPs take seriously.

And with the beautiful rich Jamaican voice of the Speakers Chaplain, the Rev Rose Hudson-Wilkin, ringing out across a silent Commons chamber, there are times, like just before the debate on military action in Syria last week, when it can make the very hairs on your arms stand on end.

But how different for any politician to dare admit that this collective prayer for guidance might be the kind of prayer they would do alone. Or about a specific decision that needs to get taken in their individual working life.

That would be dangerous.

So here we are in 2015, in an age when it is easier for a politician to admit to smoking weed or watching porn, than it is to admit that they might take prayer seriously in their daily life.

Such is the sensitivity about all this that I doubt whether we will ever see again a British Prime Minister who can talk openly about the times when they might pray to God – in peacetime or at war. That would be to tread too far into the dark waters of danger and controversy.

But a society where freedom of religion is truly defended – a society which is friendly towards faith – is one where people should, I suggest, feel able to speak about how they practice their faith without fear of suspicion or ridicule.

And a society which does not defend religious freedom cannot be described as truly free.

Religious freedom is not just for the convenience of those who practice a particular faith. But the society that preserves freedom of religion, that truly values it, is a better place for everyone.

Religious freedom is what economists might call a public good – my enjoyment of it does not reduce the amount of religious freedom available to my neighbour to enjoy their faith. And it is really important as Christians that we do not simply make a plea for our own rights to practice faith, but that we are as passionate about seeing the same freedoms for those who do not share our faith.

No-one should be more concerned or angry about the rise in casual antisemitism in Britain than Christians – or the shameful fact that Jewish schools require security guards to keep their pupils safe.

No-one should be louder in their denunciation of graffiti attacks on mosques or verbal assaults on girls wearing hijabs than Christians.

And when it comes to what is happening overseas, no-one should be more vocal in condemning the systematic persecution of other faiths or the barbaric punishment of gay people under theocratic regimes than Christians.

But here in the UK I believe the quantum of religious freedom to be enjoyed is being reduced, as faith gets squeezed further into the margins of public life and religion becomes delegitimized through suspicion, fear or ridicule.

And herein lies the challenge – this would not be so much of a problem if Britain was losing its religion. But Britain in 2015 is a society where faith still matters, and it matters to enormous numbers of people. The report from the Commission on Religion in Public Life yesterday recognised that that religion and belief are still driving forces in British life.

And with the demographic changes we have seen in the last ten or twenty years, there are parts of the country where faith is becoming more important – not less.

Immigration has provided a massive boost to Britain’s churches. Just observe the numbers of people holding Bibles at bus stops in the inner cities on a Sunday morning or reading them on the Tube during the working week.

But one of the most profound demographic shifts we are seeing is the number of people who share the Muslim faith. It is the fastest growing religion in Britain and across Europe.

And with a conflict going on within Islam against extremist ideologies, a society which feels less open and welcoming to people of all faiths, where faith is pushed to the margins of our national life, is one which is actually less resilient to the poison of the extremists.

If you are a young Muslim growing up in East London, Cardiff or Luton the only time – the only time – you will see your faith being mentioned in mainstream British media is in connection with death and violence.  That has consequences, especially when there are complex issues of identity involved.

And this is where is the hard-edged secularism I described earlier actually serves to aid and abet the extremism we are all seeking to confront. Because if you push faith to the margins, then to the margins and into the shadows faith will be outworked.

In place of the public sharing and discussion of doctrine and belief comes the exploration of faith online in near anonymity, the private chatrooms where there is free rein to blend poison and truth. In place of the legitimate tested voices of teaching and leadership, tested in and by the community out in the open, you get shadowy teachers, people who go house to house plying their trade, or skype calls with jihadi poster boys. And rather than teachings tested over centuries against a stable and evolving orthodoxy you get warped spin-off theologies.

Muslim families I have spoken to know that they face a battle to save their young people from the poison of extremism. They know they are not sighted on what their children are doing online, and fear them turning their backs on the mosque for other forms of religious exploration.

The battle against extremism won’t just be won in the streets and hideouts of Raqqa, but within Britain – family by family and community by community.  And for young Muslims who feel passionate about their faith, and who may not feel they have a stake in the society around them, the answer to the seduction of ISIS/Daesh is not a greater dose of secularism that delegitimizes their faith in the public space.

That is why I believe the marginalisation of religion in our national life risks pushing more young Muslims into the arms of ISIS/Daesh.

But let’s be clear… a strong defence of religious freedom does not mean an acceptance of cultural practices, supposedly religiously based or not, which are opposed to other fundamental freedoms in our society. Religious freedom is no more of an excuse for turning a blind eye to unacceptable practices than is the discredited desire to promote multiculturalism at almost any cost.

And as a society we have not been nearly as strong as we should have in confronting and challenging these practices.

Think of the rights of women and girls in our society. In the last few years, through the work of Theresa May and Nicky Morgan, we have begun to make some significant strides in the direction of tackling some appalling abuses that have been allowed to fester – in the areas of forced marriage or FGM, for example.

But the truth is that for far too long Britain was not been muscular enough in defending core freedoms.

And it starts with the seemingly small things… no political party, for example, should be holding public meetings where men and women are expected (if not directed outright) to sit apart from each other.

Defending religious freedom also does not mean a watering down of religious belief to some lowest common denominator which aims to satisfy everyone and pleases no-one. You see this readily in some schools – the stripping out of what is distinctive about our faiths and its replacement with some mushy well-meaning consensus but which is actually meaningless for those who follow a faith.

The Headteacher of one of our inner city Free Schools – a Church school with a strong and upfront Christian ethos – recently described it to me like this: The Muslim children in his school do very well, he said. Academically it is an attractive school for them and their parents, but also the fact that it is pretty uncompromising in its Christian ethos – in its core belief in the risen Saviour Jesus Christ – provides a stronger and more secure environment, he says, for pupils to debate and question each other about their beliefs. Clarity of ethos is a draw for people of other faiths, not a repellent.

There is nothing to respect or admire about some watered-down common religious offering in the name of multiculturalism.

What are the risks of not challenging the intolerance of hard-edged secularism in our society? What might be lost?

I said a few moments ago that a society which does defend religious freedom is not truly free.  I also believe it leads to a less successful society and economy. Over the last 400 years religious freedom and tolerance have helped provide the intellectual well-spring of achievement and innovation in Britain, as well as a rich and strong fabric of civil society that has served to protect the vulnerable and those in need.

The marginalising of faith in our public life risks snuffing out an enormous source of positive, creative, innovative goodness in society. I think of some of the projects and organisations I have personally seen in recent months…

…Street Pastors who help make town centres a safer and more caring place for clubbers and party-goers at 2am on a Saturday night;

…the Leaf Project in Cardiff challenging young Muslims who have been in prison to face up to the consequences of their life choices;

…CAP (Christians Against Poverty) – one of the most effective organisations in Britain for helping people of all faiths and none overcome indebtedness;

…and older organisations like the Salvation Army founded in another era but which continues to do truly remarkable work in the field of social services.

Being a faith-based social action organisation does not automatically make it more effective – of course it doesn’t.  But faith does provide a spark of energy and a commitment which enables volunteers in these organisations to make a huge contribution to our society.

The stigmatization of faith, intolerance towards religion in our public life, will reduce the overall stock of goodness at work in our society.

So what is the response?

I think there is an immediate challenge here for politicians – myself included – in ‘renormalising’ faith.  Maybe we can and should be a little bit more open about our faith – even the stuff we are not sure about, our doubts and the things we are not clear about.

Maybe rather than stay silent about things like prayer, which is at the heart of so many faiths, we can try to explain what we think it is all about.

Writing in another age, William Wilberforce in his book Real Christianity observed that “Christianity has been successfully attacked and marginalized… because those who professed belief were unable to defend the faith from attack, even though its attackers’ arguments were deeply flawed.”

And there is a challenge too for the Church, I believe, in responding to those of other faiths and none.

In an age where society is characterised by enormous loneliness and fragmentation, Church needs to be a place that stands on the side of community, relationships, and reaching out.

No one should be more active in reaching out in a spirit of friendship and openness to Britain’s Muslims, for example, than Christians. …building community with them. Building One Nation.

Defending freedom of religion does not mean protecting the rights of a shrill and angry Christian club which doesn’t like how society is changing around it.  And let me say that some of the emails and letters I have received in the last year about Muslims and gay people from people describing themselves as Christians have been frankly shameful.

Those attitudes cannot possibly represent what we are about.

Far from being an enemy of the tradition of tolerance and liberty that marks Britain out in world history over the last 500 years, Christianity has been a foundation stone.  And we should live up to that heritage.

Indeed, Wilberforce’s love of freedom, his recognition of the dignity of all humanity, his desire for an end to the injustice of seeing people treated as subhuman – as tradable commodities – because of the colour of their skin….

…All of that sprung directly from his deep, fervent Christian faith... his troublesome, inconvenient, scandalous faith in Jesus Christ

…A faith which so many people said at the time had no place in mainstream public life.

Thank you for listening.

**END**