

The Bishop of Winchester

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The Diocese of
Winchester



Hampshire Interfaith Network Lecture

November 18th 2010

Respect, Collaboration, Dialogue and Mystery **Inter-Faith Issues and their impact on Hampshire.**

This is the fourth in this series of annual Lectures in Interfaith Week; and I congratulate the County Council on its sponsorship of the Hampshire Interfaith Network, and so of these Lectures on “Inter-Faith Issues and their impact on Hampshire. It is a privilege to follow three distinguished predecessors, Rageh Omaar, Indarjit Singh and Lionel Blue; and I’m glad that I was able to hear the first two of them.

I have been asked to offer this Lecture as a “Christian perspective on Interfaith matters”; and I do so with particular pleasure, having always been warmly welcomed in Synagogues and Mosques, Temples and Gurdwaras in Hampshire and in Bournemouth.

Asked a month or so ago for a Title, I rang back after some thought and offered “*Respect, Collaboration and Mystery*”. Now that I have thought and read further, I hope that you will allow me to add a fourth word, after the first two and before the last, *Dialogue*. And I shall end by exploring these four resonant words, *Respect, Collaboration, Dialogue and Mystery*, as a way of drawing together this lecture on “Interfaith issues and their impact on Hampshire”.

It is appropriate that there should be, among your successive lecturers, “a Christian perspective”, because the Churches are in three ways at least part of the Interfaith scene in England and in Hampshire. We’re obviously part of it – and in fact numerically the largest element of it; we’re part of it because in many places, and notably in Southampton over many years, and often led by the Church of England, Churches of all traditions have shouldered some responsibility for enabling work by the range of faith communities on the relationships between them and on the social and political questions that face them; and we’re part of it, because many Churches have devoted significant resource, over thirty years and more, to reflecting on Interfaith Issues and studying the situations that face people of all faiths as they – we – live together in this country. I shall not mention all these; but I do mention a significant Booklet published this spring by the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger: Fostering respect and mutual understanding between the religions*, which built on the ground-breaking work, on this as on many others matters, of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s; and the Church of England’s extensive work in recent years, which is ongoing, under the finely descriptive title, *Presence and Engagement*. (Incidentally, this has been led, until his retirement a few months ago, by Bishop David James of Bradford – who was Vicar of Highfield in Southampton some years ago)

Research for *Presence and Engagement*. has shown that according to the 2001 Census, of the 13,000 parishes through which the Church of England serves every part of the country, in 900 10% or more of those resident profess Faiths other than Christianity; in 62 of these, over half of the population, and in further 228 between ¼ and ½ were of other Faiths. I have had first-hand experience of some of these as the Area Bishop responsible for Stoke-on-Trent, where (as in many other places) there are Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary Schools 90% or more of whose children are Muslim, before I was called to this Diocese 15 years ago. In all these places, and in very many others, much of the world is found today in a small area of an English city – languages, customs, dress, food, ethnicities, as well as a range of Faiths and places of worship, with all that this means as much for those whose great-grandparents were born far away, as for those whose great-grandparents were born in England, let alone in or close to where they live now. In these areas, too, people of all

religions and ethnicities very frequently live with significant poverty, unemployment, political and social marginalisation; a fact which can make good relations between the Faiths more difficult.

The Churches are convinced that people and communities of Faith are overwhelmingly a force for good, both in this country and across the world; and the present Government at last thinks so too; the Rt Hon. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, said in August this year: *“Religion is often seen as part of the problem; the new Government sees it as part of the solution.”* Yes, there are terrible exceptions to this assertion that “people and communities of Faith are a force for good”; but overwhelmingly, in every part of the world, people and communities of Faith enable people to live decent, honest, caring, responsible lives, to sustain their marriages and bring up their children, and to share in building fruitful, peaceful communities. So the Churches recognise that these areas, such as central Southampton, where such concentrations of people of a range of Faiths live at close quarters with each other, are a critical test-bed not only for building the *Common Good* (a very useful term for which we have the Roman Catholic Church to thank) in this country, but more widely too; and that it is vital for the world’s peace in this century that we learn, everywhere, not only to construct and to live in, but to value and enjoy, a society made up of people of many Faiths. It is very good that the County Council recognises this by its sponsorship of the Hampshire Interfaith Network as well as in other ways; and when I looked at HIFN’s website, I was particularly glad to see the section depicting the Network’s activities for young people and children.

Yet this reality – the inter-face between people of more than one Faith - is still widely experienced as a problem, whether in this country, and so in Hampshire, or across the world.

The inter-face between people of more than one Faith

- presents a problem in this country to many of those formed a generation or two ago, and today well represented in the media and in the “chattering classes” more widely, who grew up learning that Faith was dying in the Northern hemisphere, and that as the Southern hemisphere developed it would follow the same path. They have been disconcerted to find not only that Christian Faith has still not taken refuge in the cupboard in Europe and in this country, and that it thrives and grows not only across the world but in many places here; but that across the world so many other Faiths have proved resilient, vibrant and highly influential – and that they now have deep roots in this country too!
- It presents a problem too to people who do not themselves live within a community of Faith, for whom that whole experience is strange, foreign, even undesirable, and beyond their comprehension; especially if they went to school before there was any significant degree of learning about people of a range of Faiths, they find themselves without the skills, the language and the ideas to understand and to feel at ease with the situation in which they find themselves living.
- It presents perhaps still more of a problem, and a problem at a deeper level, to many of those who do practice a Faith; partly because some of us, too, have received very little help in understanding Faiths other than our own; and then because what we see around us, the range of other Faiths down our streets, challenges some of the ways in which we were brought up in our own Faith, and the claims to uniqueness, superiority, which are fundamental to many if not all the major Faiths. So the reality, in the midst of which we live, is profoundly puzzling, indeed mysterious, devotionally, intellectually, theologically – so, *Mystery* in my title.
- And the inter-face between people of more than one Faith presents a problem to many people of Faith, across the rest of the world and here, above all because the long history, stretching back a 1000 years or more before the Common Era, of the inter-face between Faiths is full much more of bad stories, or stories that can be told as if the bad was all there was, than of good ones – though there are good stories in the texts of the Faiths, and in peoples’ experience, too, and in every period. But at the points of inter-face, of potential co-existence and collaboration, there has so often been violence, threats, coercion, the eradication that today we have come to call, in a horrible euphemism, “cleansing” – and not only between Faiths, but between different forms of particular Faiths. Protestant and Catholic, down the centuries in Europe and then in every part of the world; Sunni and Shia in the Muslim lands, mutually opposed sects and traditions within Buddhism and Hinduism

and other religions. While many in the Muslim lands remember the Crusades, many in North Africa remember that it was mostly Christian for centuries before it became largely Muslim - and both with the same intense, deep-rooted remembering with which people in Northern Ireland remember "King Billy". In many parts of the world the toleration of people who worship and believe differently, that in the late 17th century became mostly the norm in Europe in an appalled and exhausted reaction to the centuries-long wars of religion, has not arrived.....

- And in many places where the inter-face is often still violent, or threatens violence constantly, today, though the fundamental missionary character of either or both of Christianity and of Islam may be one cause, the deeper and stronger sparks generally lie in the thrusts for political and economic ascendancy, or for vital resources like water or minerals or employment, which can play on Faith-differences, sometimes in some quite other part of the world, and call them in aid – think of Northern Ireland, of Baghdad, the tensions that erupt into terrible violence between Christian and Muslim in Nigeria, Indonesia and Iraq, between Muslim and Hindu in the Indian sub-continent, between Buddhist and Muslim in Burma, between Israeli and Palestinian; and think of the terrible effects, in places the other side of the world, of the folly of the small-town pastor in the USA who recently threatened to burn copies of the Koran.

But just as I said, a few minutes ago, that communities of Faith are overwhelmingly a force for good, both in this country and across the world, so it is also the case that the internet, and globalisation, mean that fruitful relations between the Faiths in Hampshire, and across the UK, can have beneficially educative effects elsewhere. The Faiths represented in Hampshire are all "world Faiths"; and not only because their adherents are to be found in many parts of the world, but because their adherents in Hampshire have all kinds of links with their fellow-religionists across the world – family and marriage relationships, correspondence now facilitated by the internet, travel, remittances, the partnership links of churches with churches in the developing world – all can open eyes and imaginations to what is possible, desirable, vital in the ways in which Faiths negotiate the inter-faces between them; and stories of neighbourliness, kindness and compassion, between people of different Faiths living in one street, or working in care-homes and hospitals, in this country may have their effects elsewhere.....

I have used so far the accepted language of "Faiths" – starting from the word "*Inter-Faith*" in the title of the Sponsor of these Lectures. But with many others I think that we are beginning to see how this use of the word "Faith", and especially its use by organs of Government and by the media, may risk becoming un-helpful and distorting – think of "faith-schools", "faith communities", even of the "communities of no-faith" who nowadays have to be represented when Government Departments are talking with representatives of the Religions present in this country! The generalisation "faith-schools" is applied to a very wide range of pretty different institutions even within those of a single religion or denomination; and "faith-communities" are infinitely more varied, internally disparate, than the title suggests. Public bodies, increasingly served today by people with little or no understanding themselves, from "inside" a religious tradition, of what this means to those who do live within the life of a world religion, increasingly deal with a homogenised entity, "Faith", which has little or no reality, and serves to blur distinctions within as well as between the religious communities with which they are seeking to work. The religions of the world are not, in the understanding of their adherents, all versions of the same thing, at any rate until you reach very deep levels of devotion and reflection indeed. I agree with those who prefer to speak of "inter-religious" relationships – though this language alone will not stop us generalising where generalisations will be at best misleading....

Before I bring this lecture to an end with the help of the three, now four, words of my title - *Respect, Collaboration, Dialogue and Mystery* – I'm going to note some questions to the Religions themselves, and to those of us, here and elsewhere, who are among their adherents; and some questions to political leaders whose decisions fundamentally affect the possibility of attaining the fruitful, creative, peaceful relationships between the religions of the world, that the world needs for its peace in this century.

In another of his telling contributions to Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*, last Friday and for the start of Interfaith Week, the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, noted that there came a point, in this country, when "people realised that instead of saying, "Religious convictions are important, therefore everyone should have the correct ones", you could draw a different conclusion: "Religious convictions are important; therefore everyone should have the right to live according to his or her beliefs."..... That was one of the transformative moments of the modern world." Of course neither in this country, nor in every other part of the world, have the Christian churches fully absorbed that insight; but can, will other major religions move towards making the same step-change? Which will include learning the disciplines of living, and contributing, as a minority, as one Faith among others, to a society's life, disclaiming any ambition to take that society over; and allowing adherents the freedom, the human right, to change from one religion to another without fear of sanctions? I was fascinated to meet, this summer a UK-born and educated Muslim who told me that he was reading Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial book on *The Reformation*; "that's the position we're entering, isn't it?", he said to me..... That man is an example to us all; because particularly when no great Religion, Christianity included, has people who can speak authoritatively for it, let alone "deliver" their Religion at points of crisis between the religions, it is crucial that more and more of those of us who live within the life of a particular religion, are sufficiently educated about other Religions, and in many places sufficiently courageous, to speak clearly about the imperative of good, non-violent and fruitful inter-religious relationships and to work to assist them to develop.

The priorities, the policies, the behaviour and the courage or lack of courage of Governments significantly affect inter-religious relationships in Hampshire, and in every other part of this country and of the world. I have not managed to think of a contemporary point of tension, suspicion or violence between religions, where smouldering memories of the colonial past, or poverty and lack of development, or conflicting claims to minerals or water, or a remembered wrong – or some mix of many or all of these – does not fuel the inter-religious tension. Think of the poverty, unemployment and social marginalisation in the towns and cities of this country, of France or of Germany where there has been religious and ethnic conflict in recent decades. Think of the still so intractable situation in Israel and in the Occupied Territories, with its power to keep alive and raw the insecurities of Jewish people following the long centuries of European ill-treatment that culminated in the Holocaust, and Palestinian memories of the "Catastrophe" of 1948, and to inflame to violence hearts and minds right across the Arab and Muslim world. Think of the continuing "struggle for Africa", still motivated both by religion and by economics, which today has as its protagonists not the European and Christian powers of the 19th and 20th centuries, but substantially the Arab and Muslim powers of North Africa, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (as well as China). In many places, inter-religious relationships can only be lastingly improved, as politicians and diplomats devote resources to finding means of resolving, and by peaceful means, ("Never Again!" was the slogan with which the annual Remembrance Day was begun as long ago as 1919!), tensions, suspicions and hatreds with their roots deep in history, to lessening inequalities, and to realising the Millennium Development Goals and all that they represent.

Finally, to my four Words, *Respect, Collaboration, Dialogue and Mystery*.

Respect In more and more places, at more and more levels of more and more societies, people who practice one religion are learning to respect, to value, to honour, to appreciate those who practice other religions; religious leaders are prepared to be photographed together; we recognise and appreciate elements of Truth, and of Holiness of life, in each others religions and in each other as individuals; we are edging towards recognising elements of congruency, if not of unity, of belief about our origins, and about our destinies, as human beings; we are increasingly determining to walk alongside each other in peace through all that we have not yet understood about our differences one from another; we accept and value "pluralism" as a fact and as a legitimate aim, freedom from persecution, equality before the law within the constraints of, but also contributing to, the Common Good. Sometimes people of no religion are well behind those who live within a religion, in behaving towards us in these ways! The Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict xvi to Religious Leaders on the Friday morning of his recent visit is a fine example of these convictions, this practice, at its best.

But even in UK society, in Western Europe and in North America, these values, these behaviours, remain fragile and require constant attention, and education, and encouragement – especially where people and communities are pressured economically, and feel marginalised. Over much of the rest of the world, there is a very long way to go indeed before they are even desired as goals, let alone realities. I have suggested that persevering towards them in Hampshire may have influence elsewhere beyond our knowledge or imagining..... Perhaps there might emerge from Hampshire, and from the Interfaith network, an initiative similar to that from a northern English city a few years ago, when an Anglican bishop and other Christians, and some leaders of other religions in the city, went together to the Islamic country with whose Anglican Church the Diocese had a Partnership, witnessing to the freedom of minorities to practice their religion, including its missionary ingredient, in this country.....

Collaboration

In the Westminster Parliament, members of different religions work as colleagues on a number of issues to do with respect for minorities, and space for religious convictions, in the face of secularising pressures, within the developing Equality legislation, in defence of Marriage and of freedom of religious education and expression.

In many places, as in Southampton and other Hampshire towns, people of a range of Faiths collaborate in care for the poor, in advocacy for asylum seekers – sometimes, sadly, more than different, perhaps mutually suspicious, groups with each religion collaborate together! Religious groups contribute together, as well as separately, to the *Common Good*, to the “*Big Society*”.

There is growing collaboration between the Aid “arms” of the religions, in the delivery of Aid in times and places of need.

And in a place of great religious and political tension, as I was once a dinner-guest in the home of a Burmese Anglican bishop and his wife, they told me how not long before their compound had become a place of refuge for most of the Muslims in the town, and that the Bishop had stood at his gate face-to-face with the Buddhist monks and other people who had chased the Muslims there – a demanding collaboration, replicated from time to time, with different players, in this country too!

Dialogue

Arising out of, dependent upon, *Respect and Collaboration* may grow Dialogue, learning in conversation about each other’s religions and about each other’s practice of them, growing in mutual appreciation, discerning differences and similarities, each finding their own devotion and worship and living enhanced and challenged. Dialogue requires time and patience, knowledge and a will to listen and learn and share; as His Holiness the Pope put it, “*Collaboration and dialogue between religions calls for mutual respect, the freedom to practise one’s religion and engage in acts of public worship, and the freedom to follow one’s conscience without suffering ostracism or persecution, even after conversion from one religion to another.*” . I hope that you may tell me where mutual understanding and friendship, between people of different religions, has moved on to Dialogue in Hampshire. Dialogue will explore, search out the rationale for, the things that are distinctive within, and the things that are difficult between, our religions. It will explore our different histories, our historic wounds at each other’s hands, our Scriptures, together. It does not aim at the other’s deciding to move from one religion to another - though sometimes this may be its eventual outcome.

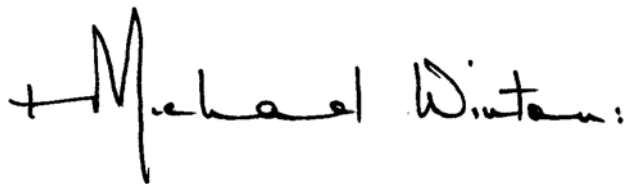
I’m sadly aware that my own Church, my own Faith, my own Diocese, does not expend the resources and the time that will make Dialogue more possible, especially at a quite local level (though there are a small number of Dialogues initiated by the Churches at an international level); I do not even know whether there are Christians in Hampshire who can read the Grant Sahib, the Koran, or fundamental texts of Buddhists or Hindus, in their original languages (some of us do, however, have some knowledge of Biblical Hebrew).

Lastly, and appropriately, ***Mystery***

Mystery, because as I have already said, for everyone in this country, and in most villages as well as in every city and town, people of another religion are in front of us on the pavement, alongside us in the bus or the train, not (as they mostly were, say, 70 years ago) on the other side of the world.

I find that to me at any rate, and I imagine to any reflective Christian – and then especially to thoughtful Jews and Muslims, and then to thoughtful people of other religious traditions – this reality which I welcome on the personal, the political and the social level, poses sharp theological questions in the most basic sense of the word, questions about God; and then a welter of subsidiary but important questions, about the inspiration and reliability of the Scriptures, and of the whole tradition of teaching and practice and living that are the context, the horizons and the basis of my own life. Because I believe that **“the Lord our God is one Lord”** with as much clarity and passion as does a Jew, a Muslim or a Sikh, it is, to put it baldly, both profoundly mysterious, and profoundly confusing, even undermining, that the One God has after all apparently revealed Himself in different, though by no means unrelated terms, within other religious traditions of worship, faith and practice – within each of which I believe that I can trace and recognise characteristics of his Presence and his Blessing.

What to do? Practise *Respect, Collaboration, Dialogue*, with all that they mean in the way of the best, the most compassionate, the most peaceful, the most observant and the most obedient “walking” in the religious tradition into which God has placed us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Winter". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning of the first letter 'M'.

25.11.2010.