

**CHURCH OF ST. MARY MAGDALENE, LEINTWARDINE
SUNDAY 3 MAY, 2003
ADDRESS BY SIR LESLIE FIELDING
(LAY READER)**

WINDOWS INTO OTHER WORLDS: CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

“Listen to me, you coasts and islands : pay heed, you peoples far away”. Isaiah Chapter 49 v 1.

“As I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other things the inscription, ‘To An Unknown God’. What you worship but do not know – this is what I now proclaim”. Acts of the Apostles Chapter 17 v 23.

“I am the good shepherd ; I know my own sheep and my sheep know me But there are other sheep of mine, not belonging to this fold, whom I must bring in ; and they too will listen to my voice. There will then be one flock, on shepherd”. John 10 v 14-16.

Introduction

In the February issue of Leominster Deanery News, there is a letter from a Tanzanian Christian couple, David and Christine Mnankali, staying with the Rural Dean. They write “All in all, God loves his people. He works among his people, no matter to what tradition culture, colour or gender they belong. There is no barrier in God’s love”. This is true, of course, of God’s Christians. But it is also true of all God’s human creatures, Christian or not.

Here in England, we regularly observe weeks of Christian unity. But we have also initiated inter-faith dialogue ; and will continue with it, notwithstanding the growing concern over “Islamist” terrorism. So, in the light of experience of having actually lived in the Middle East, South East Asia and the Far East, and of having travelled widely elsewhere in the world, I shall talk this morning about Christianity and other religions.

I preach, I should make plain at the outset, as an ordinary, straight-up-and-down, Anglican, who reads his Bible, says his prayers, and is present each week at the Eucharist. Someone who respects the tradition of the Christian centuries and subscribes to the great creeds and formularies of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Not enormously

“High”, but nevertheless a traditionalist. Not markedly broad, but still a liberal intellectual. Anyway, as someone for whom the mind of Jesus is the mind of God .

The Challenge

In recent years, we in England have been made well aware of what is called “religious pluralism”. Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Parsees, Sikhs and Shintoists. The animist, the polytheist, the deist. God loves them, too. Yet they appear to know God differently from each other. And differently from us.

The world was ever this way. Christians in Africa and Asia knew it, years ago. But never more than now has the extent of this diversity become so apparent to ordinary Christians in the West. Books, films, television programmes, travel, have brought the world together and broadened our horizons. The migration of peoples, and the upheavals of recent wars and religious conflicts, have done likewise. Christians in Europe and America can now see with their own eyes things that, a century ago, only a minority of Western missionaries, soldiers and tradesmen had ever directly experienced.

Going back to New Testament times, Saint Paul, although an educated and travelled man, encountered only the religions and cults of the eastern Roman Empire. In subsequent centuries, when Christianity had become established, neither the Venerable Bede in his remote monastery of Jarrow ; nor Saint Thomas Aquinas (although that other friar, St. Francis of Assisi, was an exception) and the medieval scholastic theologians ; nor Martin Luther at Wittenburg ; nor John Calvin in Geneva, had ever set foot outside Christendom. They knew very little (and some of them may have cared even less) about what religions lay beyond. True, in the centuries which followed the Reformation – as trade opened up, and Western colonies and empires were established, and explorers set foot in remote and hitherto unknown continents – the Christians of the West became more aware of other faiths. But their initial approach was probably at best condescending and at worst condemnatory. To the simple churchman in Bristol or Boston or Bombay or Buenos Aires in the Nineteenth Century, other religions were all too often mere “ignorant paganism”, or the work of the Devil.

Not so today. The Nineteenth Century Anglo-Saxon hope of the conversion of the entire world to Christianity, preferably in its Western Protestant form, is now seen as unrealistic. For the foreseeable future, religious pluralism on this planet seems likely to continue. And as far as we now can judge, there is something to be said for some at least of the world’s other religions. But which religion is “right”? Or nearest to the “truth”? Is there anything in common between religions?

For you and me, the Christian Faith is unique, because of the Incarnation. Religiously inspired people have always reached out for God ; but only in Jesus Christ has God reached out so far towards mankind, as to enter our world, on human terms, for our salvation. But still there remains the question of “them and us”. And there are three possible Christian approaches to other people’s religions : to God’s other sheep.

The first is the path of “**isolationism**”. It is to argue, not only that we are “right”, but also that all the rest are quite simple totally “wrong”. We should pull up the drawbridge ; emphasise our total distinctiveness ; concede nothing to anyone outside. I find this approach blinkered, uncompassionate, even a touch fanatical. It does not fit, subjectively, what I personally have seen and felt (for what little that may be worth). Much more to the point, it does not admit the “hidden hand” of God in His own creation. It does not allow for the inexpressible greatness of God, or His love or His mercy. And it is not for us to make final judgements on people, as we know from Our Lord’s parable about the wheat and the tares, and from the story of the woman taken in adultery. Judgement is ultimately a matter for God, not ourselves.

The second way of thinking is that of “**relativism**” and “**syncretism**”. It is to move in the opposite direction and say that pretty well all religions are more or less equal. The idea is not new. The Roman Emperor Alexander Severus is said to have kept in his private chapel not only the statues of the deified Emperors, but also the bust of Orpheus, Abraham, Apollonius of Tyana and Jesus of Nazareth. The Moghul conqueror, Akbar the Great, tried to create a new universal faith made up of all the religions within his Empire rolled into one. But this second way doesn’t work either. All religions are not equally true and equally good. Nor can you boil down and blend all the world’s faiths in a stock pot, to produce a Highest Common Factor religion : you tend to get only an amorphous mish-mash. Religion, it has been said, is like language. You can’t speak language in general. You have to speak a particular language. And Christians would not want the Christ Child to drain away with the inter-faith bath water.

There is, however a **third option**. It is sometimes call “dialectical tension”, sometimes “reconception”, sometimes “constructive engagement”, and sometimes simply “openness”. Whatever we call it, this “third option”, without disloyalty to Our Lord, simply means our trying to be better aware of what goes on outside Our Lord’s Church.

How I See It

As Anglicans, we are committed to God as He has been revealed to us in Christ ; to Christ as the head of the Church ; to the Church in which God’s Holy Spirit draws us to each other and to Him. But we can also open our hearts to the religious instincts of God’s non-Christian people. We can ask what we can learn from them. It is because God is

omnipresent and all-powerful, and because He is the God of Love, that He inevitably has commerce with men and women outside our own faith as well as inside it. We Christians are not the only pebbles on God's beach. There are other sheep on the hillside, for whom our shepherd has plans best known to Him.

This approach is consistent with modern scientific insights into man's place in the universe ; and with today's understanding of Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church.

Astronomy

To take science first. The sun is one of some 100,000 million stars in our galaxy, a galaxy itself one of billions of other galaxies, of which we can see at least 10,000 million through our largest optical telescopes. We have just begun to detect the existence of planets, orbiting round some of those stars. There could even be billions of "other Earths". Millions of them may well contain sentient, reasoning and morally responsive life-forms. Those creatures, if they exist, will be part of God's other sheep. At vast distances of many light years, they will certainly not be members of the Church of England. But this does not mean that they will not be visited by an incarnate God, or touched in some other mysterious and loving way by the hand of their Creator.

Her grandson has drawn my attention to a remarkable poem written by Alice Meynell, a R.C. convert, towards the end of the last century. It is called "Christ in the Universe", and here are two verses from it :

"Nor, in our little day,
May His devices with the heavens be guessed,
His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way,
Or His bestowals there be manifest.

But, in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear".

The History of our own Earth

Let us turn from the stars and look at our own world. Archaeology, anthropology and comparative religion show us the humble roots of all our advanced religious ideas. They suggest that the Judaic concept of one supreme personal God, while a wonderful

advance in human understanding, inspired by God, was a progressive and not in all respects a unique revelation. With the Divine encouragement, the monotheism of what was to be the Old Testament grew out of the sky gods apprehended by the prehistoric Semite desert-dwellers. And Judaism took some of its ideas – about creation and the flood, for example – from other prehistoric faiths in the Fertile Crescent. But a certain “commonality” in diversity eventually became apparent. All religions, whatever their form, and even when they were mistaken and evil, spoke of man’s awareness of “something other” – of the impinging of something which could be called “Holy Being” on the consciousness of man ; and of man’s shivering, groping, response to that impingement. God called, and mankind strained to catch what He was saying. (There is a strange echo of this perception in “Star Wars” – when the heroes comfort each other with the invocation : “May the Force be with you!”).

The Witness of Scripture and Tradition

You can see that universal “Force”, if you have the eyes of faith, not only in modern scientific knowledge but also in the Bible and in the history of the Christian Church.

The Israelites of the Old Testament saw themselves as marked out for a privileged relationship with God. But as their religious instincts grew deeper, they grew wider also. In Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, we see no longer an exclusive tribal Jahweh ; but hints of a universal Divine Providence reaching out to all people. In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Paul tells the Athenians, with their many gods and altars, that they have been worshipping God without knowing who He is. While Saint Matthew takes the theoretical “ancestry” of Jesus back only to Abraham, Saint Luke traces it back behind the Israelites to Adam, the first man. Saint John’s Gospel opens with the affirmation that the divine “Logos” was in the world from the beginning and that the life of this Logos is the light of all people. In the same Gospel, we find Christ’s words about his “other sheep”, with which I began this address.

To be sure, the Gospel writers had Good News for human history : Christ was the incarnate God, come for the redemption of the world. As this was not to be diluted or relativised, the young Church, struggling for its survival, and then spreading into all parts of the Roman Empire, laid the emphasis of its theology initially with exclusiveness. Some of the Early Fathers - whose human perceptions, while profound, were inevitably also limited - were inclined to the view that outside the Church there was no salvation. But it is nevertheless true to say of the Christian centuries that theologians tended not to presume to lay claim to an *exclusive* knowledge of God. More often than not, they recognised the presence in some non-Christian religion, and in some pagan philosophy, of some inkling of the one true God.

The Modern Idea of “Reconception”

Contemporary Christian thinkers appear to be going further, with what they call the idea of “**reconception**”. What they mean by it is that, in an ecumenical movement between religions, each might set out to re-think or “reconceive” itself in the light of what it can learn from other faiths, but without ceasing to be true to itself.

It is, of course, always good, from time to time, to put ourselves in other peoples shoes. The novelist, Ian McEwan – a distinguished alumnus of the University of Sussex, and one upon whom I conferred an Honorary Doctorate of Letters – put it well when he wrote recently that : “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of our compassion, and it is the beginning of morality”.

But inter-faith “reconception” is not quite so simple. I find it is a tricky exercise, best left to trained theologians, which I am not. But in the simple sense of looking for the ‘hidden hand’ of God in other religions, and thereby deepening our own Christian insights, it is probably not too difficult to attempt. Let me give you one or two straightforward examples, from my own personal experience of living in Persia, Cambodia and Japan, and travelling in India and Nepal.

I first encountered Islam in Persia in the 1950s, where I was a language student. Looking back, there were some lessons. One was the intense feeling in Islam about the power and authority of one God, behind and above the entire creation. After a ritual act of cleansing with water or sand, the Muslim begins his prayers by standing and listening ; then bows towards Mecca to show respect ; then sinks to his knees and prostrates himself - forehead, nose and hands touching the ground - before God. Islam means submission. A Muslim is one who is submitted. Think of it, when you begin to say in the Creed that you believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. A similar affirmation rises from the minaret into the high blue vault of the Middle Eastern skys. The Muezzin’s call to prayer makes the blood curdle with the absoluteness of its imperative. No atheism, no woolly agnosticism, *there*. The Muslim entirely grasps the fundamental nature of the “Force that is with us” – and which binds the whole of creation together.

From Islam, therefore, the Christian can learn to deepen his sense of humility in contemplating the Godhead. He can identify with the monotheism of Islam, in the face of atheism or polytheism. He can gain new insights into the Christian concept of Grace – because, for the Muslim, all good things come from Allah, without whom nothing has abiding content or meaning. A Muslim would therefore agree with the Book of Common Prayer, where it is written that ‘we have no power of ourselves, to help ourselves’. Islamic simplicity, not only of theology but of worship and religious architecture and adornment,

would strike a chord with the more austere Christians – Calvinist and Cistercian alike. We can also note that Islam is not only a system of belief, but also a code for living and a force for at least some form of rudimentary social justice. And from the Shi-ite Sufi minority, the Christian can be reminded of the importance of the contemplative life, and of the works of such Christian mystics as Lady Julian or St. John of the Cross, or John Bunyan.

Let me move on, to Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia in the 1960s. Much good work was done in the name of Buddha in each village pagoda – education of the young, advice to the adult, charity to the few who were needy, care for the sick. The habit of some young men (particularly future rulers and leaders) of shaving their heads and living as a monk for a space, before returning to the world, was also impressive. In Phnom Penh, I was lucky enough to have had a monk for a language tutor and I met others far and wide. They are almost certainly all dead now, carried away by the genocide of Pol Pot. But in their ascetic life-style - in their indifference to worldly things and the values of the “acquisitive society” – Western materialism received a well-deserved rebuke. In my mind’s eye, I can still see those holy men sitting in their saffron robes chanting a blessing. The rhythmic drone of their compassionate Sutras lifted them up out of the cycle of Karma and re-birth, the changes and chances of this fleeting world, towards something which lay beyond space and beyond time.

Harry Williams, the Mirfield Father, wrote as follows in “Some Day I’ll Find You” (his autobiography) :

“I see that if I had been fed by another religion, I should call the Christ Reality something else – the Buddha nature, for instance, especially with regard to the compassion shown by the Buddha when he refused Nirvana for himself in order to bring enlightenment to men. Many of the hymns addressed in the Japanese Buddhist tradition to Amida Buddha are in content identical to hymns addressed by Christians to Jesus”.

Or take the well-known Cistercian writer, Robert Merton, visiting a Buddhist sanctuary in Sri Lanka, not long before his death:

“I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation, but [that which] has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – without refutation – without establishing some other argument”.

I know, from experience of meditation in a Buddhist monastery in Cambodia, the emotion which gripped Merton when he wrote that.

As regards Hinduism, I feel less sure of my ground, having been very much less immersed. But from it, I derive at least an enhanced Christian perspective of God, not as a remote tyrant, but as a Being perpetually active in the world, immanent in humans and the created order, the source of life and love. Hindu attitudes to the physical dimension of human living, including the procreative function and the business of dying, are in some ways a useful counterpart to sub-Christian Anglo-Saxon attitudes. We may find sexually explicit Hindu temple engravings inappropriate to religious worship : but Hindus can give us a franker and less prudish acceptance of our created sexual natures. In death too, the Hindu can be closer to mother earth and better reconciled to the laws of creation than many of us – or so it seemed to me, from the funeral rites that I once stumbled upon, on the banks of the upper Ganges.

The Japanese experience is eclectic, and something else again. It is sometimes said that Japanese people are born to animist, Shinto rites ; follow a Christian form of marriage ; and arrange to have Buddhist funerals, without really believing in anything. Japan's chief lesson is, therefore, perhaps a salutary one in the opposite direction from most others : the lesson *not* to pursue out-and-out “syncretism”, *nor* to adopt “relativism” to the point of denying all absolutes.

But even here, we do well to be humble, to “take off our shoes”, since God was in Japan before we Christians were. In a Zen garden in Kyoto, meditation can open the channels of spiritual enlightenment, and can help us to understand others better, by enabling us to plumb the depths of our own consciousness. In the Pantheism of the Shinto ‘Way of the Kami’, we can reconcile what we have learned (eg. from Muslims) of God's transcendence with what we can see (with the Hindus) is also God's immanence in His creation . In Shinto, we have no ‘God of the Gaps’; but the gods of the in-between, pointers to the Divinity in rocks and trees and mountain-tops and streams. The religiosity, in present day Christian categories, is more that a touch “Celtic”. In Soka Gakai, and the other ‘new religions’, we are reminded of the need not only for (Buddhist) detachment and quietude but also for (Hindu) passion and (Muslim) desire for relevance to everyday living.

Commitment and Openness

I could go on about other faiths. But I shall conclude on a note of Christian orthodoxy.

Each of the other faiths which I have discussed has in my view a less positive side to it, with which a Christian will not normally see eye to eye. Islam can be fanatically

intolerant ; a Muslim's ethical behaviour can exhibit a more marked contradiction with religious precept than is normal with practising Christians. Buddhism can be selfish – devoted to the perfection of the individual without the Christian impulse to show solidarity with others. Hindus can be sanguinary persecutors of others ; and some of their 'gods' look like demons, to me. Neither Amida Buddha nor the Way of the Kami encouraged the slightest twinge of conscience anywhere in the Imperial Japanese Army that massacred the citizens of Nanking, put doctors and nurses to the bayonet in HongKong, and treated prisoners of war as less than animals on the Kwai. (Even today, the Japanese are in denial about things, in a way which post-war Germans have never been). There is little or no sense of individual sin, little or no soul-solace and no personal salvation, in traditional Japanese religion.

Here, I shall end what I have to say about other faiths. I have not, of course, fully understood them, not having lived them from within. I have certainly given an incomplete and over-simplified account of them. And in any case, to measure anything, you must have a yardstick. To see where anything else is, you must know where you yourself are.

The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is intended by Him to be universal : it proclaims itself in all ages, to all people, of all races, colours and persuasions. In Christ, we have been permitted to see God. But Christian commitment does not dispense us from finding time for openness also. The Divine Being impinges on human kind in many ways and in many guises, fully known only to God. Christianity is the world's largest religion – about a third of the population of the planet is Christian, where, for example, less than an eighth is Muslim. But the Christian Faith is not in vulgar competition with other religions. And Christianity is the religion of God's love, of the Shepherd's care for his sheep. The mission of the Church to the world has to be in conformity with that divine love, that shepherd's care. There should be no place, in the Church which Jesus founded, for arrogance, self-congratulation, fanaticism, coercion, selfishness. Continuous with the Church, there is a wider human community in search of God. A wider community where, in diverse ways, a reverence for God can find sincere human expression.

To other religions, therefore, let us address our enquiry and where possible our respect. When we enter their holy places, we leave our shoes behind us on the threshold and walk softly, without setting out deliberately to trample on other men's dreams, or damage the fabric which they have woven to the glory of the same God. Ubi caritas, et amor ; ibi Deus est. Or, as William Blake puts it, in "Songs of Innocence and Experience" :

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine :

Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

If we understand William Blake's "the human form divine" to be Jesus Christ, there we have the "hidden hand of God" : the worship of God, as St. Paul says, without knowing who He is.

To conclude, God and His Church are not coterminous. God is also at work outside the Church. Wherever there is goodwill and goodness, there is the grace of God. But the Church remains central to God's purposes. Therefore, in the True Faith, the commitment remains to Christ : to the Babe of Bethlehem, the Cross of Golgotha, the resurrected and ascended Lord of the Universe. Jesus of Nazareth is the true shepherd of all sheep ; the only redeemer of all peoples on earth, whether they know it or not. This is the Good News of the Gospel – indeed, the best news in the entire history of the human race.

"Dominus Nobiscum". May His "Force" be with us, now and throughout all ages.

Word Count 4296