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# **The Peter Bell Memorial Lecture 2018**

by

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***INTERFAITH—  
A BEACON OF  
HOPE***

I AM VERY GRATEFUL for and honoured by this invitation to give the Peter Bell Memorial Lecture and particularly glad to come to Leeds, because when he was a boy our son Jeremy was a keen supporter of Leeds United and his Saturday evenings were either cheerful or morose, depending on the result. As these were the great Billy Bremner days, the evenings were usually cheerful. I hope I'll get time to pay my respects at his statue.

I don't know if Peter Bell also has a statue, but his legacy lives on. I joined the World Congress of Faiths in 1965, having, like Peter, spent some time in India. This was three years before Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech that I watched when I was staying with an Indian family in Wolverhampton. So much has been done since and yet here we are in 2018 with yet another Government initiative to create a stronger, more integrated Britain – and supposedly 50 million pounds is to be made available. Peter and I would have been delighted to get 500 pounds for the work, which in those days was almost entirely voluntary and unpaid.

It is hard now for people to realise how recent is the growth of interfaith work. Even in the 1987 *Reader's Digest Universal Dictionary* the word does not exist. Still in the 1980s, there was little interest in the new faith communities that were establishing themselves in the UK. Indeed *Good Cookery* had a series of articles about them before any of the national newspapers.

Clifford Longley, Religious Affairs Correspondent for *The Times*, could say that 'the main denominations know far more about each other than they do about non-Christian religions, and tend to treat those outside any formal belief system as mere *tabula rasa*, needing not understanding but conversion 'from scratch'. He noted Archbishop Runcie's wish to talk to and learn from people of other faiths as a new departure which 'for reasons of inherited prejudice, the Church of England and the Free Churches have shied away from'. Archbishop Runcie was the first archbishop to invite guests of other faiths to his enthronement – although he asked the cameras not to show them to avoid angry objections from Christians. Indeed, at interfaith events there might be protestors with placards. The churches were more interested in conversion than conversation.

It is important to remember this, because if we do not we forget just how amazing was Peter Bell's pioneering work here in Leeds. I did not know Peter very well personally, although we were both involved with the early days of the Inter Faith Network, but Leeds Concord was an outstanding example at a time when probably there were only about a dozen local interfaith groups, although the Council of Christians and Jews had some local

branches

At the time, of course, the churches were more concerned with the growth of secularism. Indeed one rabbi in the late nineties said, 'For years, we have prayed for the revival of religion and now we wish we hadn't, because of the growth of extremism.'

In the same way, the government was preoccupied with the threat from communist countries and was very late to notice the spread of religious extremism. There was a sense of shock when the book *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson) was published in 1994. In part this was because religion was a no-go area at the UN. In preparation for the Year of Interreligious Understanding and Co-operation, three or four of us went in 1991 to meet the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations in his office in the top floor of the UN tower. We explained about the year. He replied, 'Of course, we give you our full support: but we can say nothing.' The Communist veto on religion was still too strong. By 2000, a Millennium gathering of religious leaders met in the main hall of the UN.

Another important change is in how the word 'faith' is now used. In 1936 Francis Younghusband deliberately chose the word 'faith' rather than religion because he wanted to emphasise that WCF is a fellowship of individuals not representatives of a religion. Today, however, we talk of 'faith communities' – and faith has often become a badge of identity, indicating what we should wear, what we should not eat, whom we should not marry. Spirituality was become the word for personal searching or conviction.

This means that much interfaith work today is the very important effort to bring members of different communities together. This involves visits to places of worship, greeting each other on our respective festivals, meeting and talking and, of course, eating with people of other faiths is central to the programmes of most interfaith groups. Not everyone wants to discuss religion – The Three Faiths Forum, for example, has got together singers from many backgrounds to form a Mixed Up Choir – and the music is drawn from all traditions. Recently the Pontamina Inter-religious Choir came to the UK. Pontamina means 'spiritual bridge'. The choir, which was started twenty years ago, has emerged as one of the most important actors in the field of inter-religious peace-making in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sport too: In Israel one of the peace groups got some Israeli and Palestinian youngsters together to play football and then divided them up so that each team was half Israeli and half Palestinian.

All this is extremely important, but increasingly as people of faith get to

know each other, they want to work together for peace, the protection of human rights, to help the poor and to safeguard the environment. Indeed it may be because of a shared concern for such matters that people first meet members of other faiths – for example workers of Christian Aid and Muslim Aid and many more faith-based relief agencies may be working alongside victims of an earthquake.

Indeed, it was as a student in India, going, in the midday-sun, like mad dogs and Englishmen, to help at a leprosy clinic with fellow students, of whom one was a Muslim and another a Roman Catholic from Sri Lanka, and finding the doctor was a Hindu, that I had this dream of people of all religions working together for peace and to help those in need. Peter Bell too said, ‘I have always regarded my work as the creation of new humanity where we all belong together and share each other’s burdens and rejoice together and work as a co-operative group towards justice and peace.’

To achieve this means working at a national and international level, as well as locally – and sadly communication between these levels has often been inadequate.

In Britain, the Inter Faith Network, of which Peter was a keen supporter, has done a great job in linking people who in different ways are engaged in interfaith work. It is often consulted by the government: but it not a campaigning body, such as Amnesty International and many more.

I want, however, to say more about some of the international interfaith efforts in which I have been involved, which have had this campaigning dimension. Religions for Peace’s initial concern was to be a voice for people of faith who were opposed to the nuclear arms race – and, not surprisingly, after Hiroshima, Japanese New Religious Groups with American Unitarians took the lead. It was through them that I visited Hiroshima. I was shown round by a Buddhist who had been a child of six when the bomb dropped from a clear blue sky. When she went home, there was no home; when she looked for her parents, she found no one. She told me of her many operations, but at the end of walking together round the Peace Park we were silent in prayer for healing and hope. I had something of the same deep experience, when as Director of the Council of Christians and Jews, I visited Auschwitz with some rabbis, one of whom was a survivor. The longing to heal the wounds of the past and seek a better world transcends all religious labels.

It was the concern for peace also that was the inspiration for The United Religions Initiative. It began with a telephone call from the UN inviting the Episcopal Bishop of California, Bill Swing, to host a service in the Cathedral in San Francisco. This was to be a part of the events to mark the

fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter there in 1945. Bill Swing, the bishop, that night could not sleep and kept asking himself, 'If the nations can unite, why don't the religions unite to work for peace?' Besides the service, there was gathering of young people from across the world, and one of them from Afghanistan who knew the horror of war spoke at the ceremony in the Cathedral.

It is hard often for religious bodies to do much when conflict is actually raging, but there is much that can be done in terms of preventive work and in helping to heal the wounds of war.

Development projects help to prevent conflict; but also people of faith need to speak with one voice about the values that they share. The Global Ethic is an attempt to do so.

Many of you will know the famous saying of Hans Küng:

*No human life without a world ethic for the nations;*

*No peace among nations without peace among the religions*

*No peace among the religions, without dialogue between religions.*

At the 1993 Parliament of the World's religions these became the basis for the declaration of a Global Ethic which has these Four Directives:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

It is likely at this year's Parliament of Religions in Toronto, a fifth directive will be added about commitment to respect for the environment.

It is interesting that the Declaration was not a message form leaders telling other people what they should do. It was a document that they signed to indicate their personal commitment. The signatories invited 'all people, whether religious or not, to make the same commitment.'

Attempts have been made to show that these are not just personal commitments, but apply also to the Guiding Institutions – for example, are politicians and the media all committed to promoting a 'culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness'?

People of faith can also make a major contribution to healing the wounds of conflict. Many of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

have had a religious inspiration. One thinks particularly of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's leadership in South Africa.

More informally we can be alongside others in their pain. As a member of the International Peace Council – a small group of people of faith who are committed to non-violence – I have twice been to Chiapas, which is a remote part of Mexico. Mary and I went at the invitation of Peace Councillor Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who for many years had campaigned to protect the Mayan indigenous people (or Indians as they are often called) from paramilitary groups working for multinational companies that wanted to seize their land.

The climax of the first visit was a wonderful service in the cathedral, when local indigenous people were joined by a few local Buddhists, Jews and Muslims and with members of the Peace Council to offer prayers for peace and justice. The cathedral was decorated with banners, each of which showed the symbol of one of the world's religions. At the end, instead of processing out, the Peace Councillors mingled with the congregation, lighting candles until the whole cathedral was filled with light.

Quite soon and quite unexpectedly we were asked back to Chiapas. Just before Christmas 1997 a group of refugees, who had been expelled from their land, came to the remote village of Acteal to ask for help. The locals took them in and provided for them. But the refugees were pursued by the paramilitaries and forty-five of them were gunned down. The massacre lasted for four hours. Most of the victims were women and children, many of whom had taken refuge in the chapel.

Subsequently, Bishop Samuel Ruiz invited members of the Peace Council to come as witnesses and to accompany him on All Souls' Day 1998—the Day of the Dead—to Acteal for the dedication of a memorial to those who had been massacred. The journey through the forests was difficult. I travelled with the Bishop, who always had a bodyguard. The Bishop was afraid the army would stop them reaching the village. The soldiers, however, let them through the checkpoint and in pouring rain they reached the village and slithered down a muddy bank to the chapel. The service with prayers offered by an imam, a rabbi and a Buddhist monk as well as by Christians of many traditions—all members of the Peace Council—was, intensely moving. One widow, who had lost several children, said afterwards, 'My suffering is not over but the prayers have given me hope.'

In 2003, the Peace Councillors met in Belfast at the invitation of the

Nobel Peace Prize Winner Mairead Maguire. Mary and I with another Peace Councillor, Sister Joan Chittester, went to Omagh, where Mary recalls, ‘We listened to the harrowing stories of that tragic day and although we were told of the amazing efforts to heal and rebuild the community, it was clear that the wounds were still raw. There was little one could say, but our being there and listening was, we were told, helpful. But at a meeting with some of those who had taken an active part in the troubles and spent time in prison, we noticed that they avoided the question of repentance and forgiveness and just said, “Bad things happen in war.” Yet until we can acknowledge each other’s pain –there is no healing.’

This leads me to the last part of my lecture, as I do believe that the insights of the world’s great spiritual traditions have an important contribution to make to healing the past and creating a happier and more healthy future. This is why my answer to the question that is often asked, ‘Does religion add anything specifically to such work or is the real basis our common humanity?’ is ‘Yes.’ Certainly religions recognise that this is a moral universe and that all human life is sacred, which is not the case of the ideologies that plagued the last century.

Yet we can so concentrate on what religions need to do in a suffering world that we evade challenging traditional teaching, which with claims to uniqueness denigrates other religions.

The ninth commandment is ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.’ There is today little excuse for ignorance. If, for example, you type the name of the Sufi mystic Rumi in Google search, you get over a quarter of a million items.

But more difficult than ignorance is prejudice – for example in the traditional anti-Jewish teaching of the Churches for which Pope John Paul II asked for forgiveness when he visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Fifty years on from *Nostra Aetate*, churches now make clear that Jesus was a faithful Jew and that Jesus was put to death by the Roman authorities. In the same way, we have come to see that describing Hinduism as polytheistic and idolatrous fails to recognise the Hindu sense of the Divine Spirit that pervades all life. And indeed as long ago as 1076 Pope Gregory VII wrote to the Muslim Prince al-Nasir, ‘There is a respect which we owe to each other ... because we recognise one sole God, although in different ways.’

Beyond this there is what has been called ‘comparative theology’, when together scholars of different faiths share what we can learn from each other. I know my own faith has been widened and deepened by trying to understand these different approaches and I have tried to write about this in

some of my books. I think particularly of reflecting with Jewish friends on how in the shadow of the Shoah we can still have faith in a God of love. Going on pilgrimage with Sikh friends to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where they bowed down in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, taught me a new respect for the Bible.

But such sharing raises the key question whether God is present in other communities of faith or only in our own religion.

It is sometimes said that those who study comparative religion end up 'comparatively religious'. But, in fact, learning about what others believe has not, in my experience, diluted my faith in Jesus; but has deepened it.

When I first went to India, I remember being told by Fr Murray Rogers, the leader of a Christian ashram, that the exterior dialogue should be accompanied by an inner dialogue, in which you reflect on what you have heard or read in the presence of the Lord.

I do not think that religions are really all the same. As one rabbi said 'Why should God have to keep repeating herself?' There are different defining insights and emphases in each faith rather in the way that when a mother dies, the children recall their memories. She was special to each of them but in different ways.

Too often a religion in binding together its members, also separates them from 'rival' believers. The interfaith discovery is that we can be loyal to our group but see other groups as enriching our faith rather than threatening it. The Native American leader Black Elk, at the end of the nineteenth century, said that in a vision he saw 'the hoop of my people and it was holy'. 'Then', he added, 'I saw the hoop of many religions and I saw that they were holy too.'

The interfaith movement is a constant challenge to all parochialism and undue preoccupation with dogmas and ritual.

I believe members of a religion are, as it were, trustees of a particular divine disclosure, which they preserve in their scriptures and worship. But we exercise that trusteeship best, not by protecting it from others but by sharing it with them. It saddened me in India when I visited a temple to see a notice, 'Non-Hindus not allowed.' By contrast, it was a special moment for me when in London's Regent Park Mosque we were invited to join the faithful in their prayers. The Qur'an itself says it is a 'mercy for the world' not just for Muslims and the angels' message when Jesus was born was 'peace on earth and goodwill to all people'.

This sense of oneness is emphasised by the mystics of all religions and some people now talk about 'inter-spirituality'. I know some people are



suspicious of mysticism. It has been said that it begins in mist and ends in schism. The physicist Stephen Hawking once said mysticism is for those who can't do maths. George Cairns replied, 'Mystics are people who don't need to do maths: they have direct experience.'<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill, a pioneer scholar of mysticism, said, 'Religions meet, where religions take their source: in God.' Mystics remind us that when a person is overwhelmed by the Presence of the Holy One, the path that has led up to this becomes less important.

The mystical sense of oneness is not just a oneness with God, but with all people and all life. Seventeen years before Thomas Merton (a popular guru of the seventies) became a monk, he was shopping in the centre of Louisville. 'I was,' he said, 'suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people: that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun...'<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, went on, 'There are no strangers... If only we could see each other (as we really are) all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.' Francis Younghusband, the founder of the World Congress of Faiths, after his mystical experience in Tibet said 'never again could I think evil; never again, could I bear enmity.'

The interfaith movement at its heart points us to this reality and gives us hope and the energy to go on labouring for a better world, despite the daily evidence of holy hatred and human indifference and cruelty. And when I am discouraged I think of the words of the abstract artist Naum Gabo who was asked why he continued with his work when all around there was so much destruction. He replied, 'I try to keep alive the vision of the world of our dreams.' All our faiths offer us hope for the future and perhaps hope is what we most need today.

In the words of an old hymn, 'Earth shall be fair and all her people one.'

This is why I believe the interfaith movement is a Beacon of Hope.

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1. Quoted by Wayne Teasdale in *The Mystic Heart*, Novato, CA, New World Library 1999, p. 3
  2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp.140-42



*Above: John Summerwill, Joyce Sundram, Marcus Braybrooke, Gurmukh Singh Deagon, Usha Bhardwaj*

*Below: David Randolph-Horn and Marcus Braybrooke*

