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The First Peter Bell Memorial Lecture

given by the Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal

**at Thomas Danby College, Leeds
9th March 2000**

- Good to be invited. Privileged to be first speaker in honour of Dr Peter Bell—a good friend. Thank you for inviting me.
- I want to share a memory of Dr Bell, and say something about the Methodist tradition that he was rooted in, and make some general comments.

Quote from Tadcaster 18-20 October 1985

Theme of conference: — "what it is to be a minority faith." Dr Bell spoke on the future of the churches as a religious minority in UK.

He described briefly the various responses to the churches being a minority religious community e.g.

- the call for dis-establishment of C of E
- the call for closer ecumenical relations between churches
- the fundamentalist trend
- the divide between black and white Christians and the whole question of racism—the challenge for churches to relate more closely with people of other faiths

Dr Bell saw the future in the latter. He said that the development of local inter-faith groups and movements like Concord and the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith group was an important trend. He hoped that these groups and movements throughout the country would form closer links.

His conclusion was: "it is the will and purpose of God that we should come together and to secure for each other the integrity and support we all need."

It is that message of Dr Bell that I want to leave with you. That people of different religious faiths "should come together, and ... secure for each other the integrity and support we all need."

Britain is irreversibly a multi-faith nation. The multi-faith nature of British society offers many challenges. Christians have to consider seriously what their responsibilities are in a plural society, and especially their relationships with people of other faiths.

My inspiration is Jesus Christ who was open to learning from people of other religious traditions, as we see in his encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28) - a factor that is often ignored when Christians are considering their responsibilities in relation to people of other faiths. Disciples of Jesus are called to follow the example of the learning, enquiring, humble leader.

I believe that the existence of people of many faiths is part of God's design and creation. I believe God is One, and enlightens all people.

I believe that people all around the globe have for centuries been responding to God's light and self revelation, and that great histories of response have developed into what we call religions, Faiths — shaped by languages, climates, foods, colours, songs, dances, dreams, visions, great messengers of God. Consequently all religions are different. I believe that each tradition of faith enjoys special and unique riches, gifts and insights, in the Christian faith the special and unique gift is God's self revelation in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has for millions been the Way, the Truth and the Life. To millions he is that now, and will continue to be so for millions in the future. He is such a profound figure that we need all the help and insights of other faiths, ideologies, philosophies, sciences, and so on, to understand what God has given in him.

believe that people of different faiths should share faiths with one another in a spirit of respect, in order to learn from one another, and to grow in faith. I believe that all people of good faith and good will should meet to develop a vision of inclusive human community, in which all people and their religious traditions are valued and respected, and to work towards it.

We are living in dangerous times in which scapegoats are being sought to blame for social scandals such as unemployment and homelessness, refugee, asylum and immigration matters. We are living in times of ethnic cleansing in which people are saying, "if you are different, we can't live with you". Those who represent a different world are seen as a threat and as an enemy, and are portrayed as such. Racial attacks are common.

Politicians are responding by restricting immigration and freedom of movement for black people—in the interest of racial harmony though in my view such moves are damaging to race relations. I believe that Christians, with the biblical witness of global community, ought to be proclaiming loud and clear that we have to learn to accept one another—not in spite of, but because of our differences which should be celebrated, not eroded. This should be the great missionary and evangelistic task of the church. If we don't do this, then just when we thought Apartheid was coming to an end in South Africa, it will multiply, the world over.

A German Methodist minister once told me of the occasion when he had taken a group of Methodists to visit their Jewish neighbours at a synagogue. The first time they went, a group of older Methodists were reluctant to leave the synagogue at the end of the visit. He waited as long as he could, and then asked them if they were ready to go. One of them turned to him and said, "if only we had done this 50 years ago, we might be living in a different kind of Germany". Will our children and grandchildren and their children, sit in mosques, mandirs, synagogues, viharas, gurdwaras in 50 years' time hence, saying the same about Britain and Europe? God forbid.

I would argue strongly that the multi-faith community of which we are part is a vast and rich resource for learning and growing, for all of us, whatever our tradition of faith. Let me illustrate. A group of Muslims and Christians in Sheffield who meet regularly to share faiths, were sharing together our respective understandings of prayer. We learned much about each other's traditions, and corrected some false impressions. Christians were impressed by the seriousness with which prayer was taken by Muslim sisters and brothers. At one point in the discussion we explored the issue of forgiveness: "who forgives sins, God or Jesus Christ or the priest?" asked one Muslim participant. The Christians, representing such denominations as Methodists, Quakers, Roman Catholics and Anglicans—and of different theological persuasions—were getting into quite a tangle with their attempts at a reply. It seemed as if the priest, Jesus Christ, and God had a hand in forgiving sins. Not surprisingly, there was a little confusion. In the end, to come to some clarity, most Christians present agreed with the words of the prayer of humble access in the service of Holy Communion which says that it is God's nature always "to have mercy". God forgives. The Muslim comment that followed this was most challenging for the Christians present, and gave them something to think about: "if it is God who forgives and it is the nature

of God to be forgiving—and we agree with this completely—why did Jesus have to die? If God is forgiving, why did God require Jesus to die? Why do Christians insist that my sins are not forgiven unless I accept that Jesus died to forgive my sins?"

This particular Christological challenge had never been put so forcefully and so clearly for those Christians present. The meeting and conversation between Muslims and Christians became the environment within which people of both traditions were required to think more deeply and clearly about their beliefs. This happens practically each time we engage in discussion together. The result is that most of us learn a little more about each other—and about ourselves—and our faith is deepened a little, we grow a little. Fear of each other is replaced by trust and respect.

When I preach along these lines in churches up and down the country, I get interesting responses, positive and negative.

I had a conversation like this recently, after a service in a Methodist Church. It represents what people often say to me after worship.

"You weren't happy with some of the things I was saying", I said cautiously. "How can you talk to Muslims and work with them?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"They're taking over our country."

"You've been listening to the likes of Winston Churchill too much. Don't believe everything he says about people coming in from Asia."

"But he's right. Our city is being taken over by Muslims. There seem to be more of them every time I go to the city centre, and they're taking all the best jobs. They'll take over the country".

"Can you give me any evidence?"

"We've got a Muslim Mayor in our city. And every taxi is run by them".

"You are exaggerating, and I know what you would be saying if they were all unemployed, sitting idly at home and claiming benefits."

"But it's the same the world over".

"You are grossly misrepresenting Muslims. You are breaking the command which says, 'you shall not bear false witness against your neighbours.' Have you ever talked about feelings with Muslims? Do you know any Muslim people personally, as friends?"

"No "

By this stage, a little group had gathered around us, and in a little conversation in the background, I heard someone say "we'll be all right when they've all got converted to Christianity."

"Well", I continued, "I would like you to meet Muslim friends. It is your duty to meet with them as your neighbours, and to get to know them as friends. Ask them about their beliefs and understandings of God. I would like you to come to the meetings of our Christian/Muslim group. Sometimes we meet in a mosque. Give me your name and phone number and I'll send you information about our meetings".

She did not wish to go along this direction. Our conversation was drawing to a close when she almost bowled me over by saying: "I pray to God every night that he will take Muslims away from there, back to their own country."

Contrast conversations and letters like these with groups of students who gathered around me to explore John 14:6 and who will visit centres of worship of other faiths—and Olive. Olive is 80 years old. The main base of her life in all those years has never been more than quarter of a mile from where she was born. She lives on the north western edge of Sheffield, area often described as the "leafy suburbs" or "white highlands". Olive is part of a small group of women who met regularly with me, and who over a period of two years, to explore issues related to being Christian in a multi-faith society. The group was part of a congregation with which I was based in Sheffield, and they all live in predominantly white communities. Over two years we met with representatives of Sikh, Hindu and

Muslim communities, and learned from them about what it is to be Sikh, Hindu, Muslim in Sheffield. Similarly we considered issues related to Judaism. Often when people in predominantly white communities say to me "but there are no neighbours of other faiths in this area; there's not much we can do", I get them to contact Olive.

I like to think that my first attendance as a delegate to the Methodist Conference in 1983, in Middlesbrough, coincided with a resolution on other faiths that came from the Methodist Church Overseas Division. It was that resolution which resulted in the setting up of the Methodist Committee for relations with people of other faiths and ideologies. Peter Bell and I were members of it once. Its task is to:

"stimulate or help strengthen the development of relations between local Methodist churches and Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and other religious communities within this country".

Dr Bell is one of two white British lay members of the Methodist Church for whom I have always had a high regard and great respect. The other one is Mrs Ivy Guttridge. Peter Bell in Leeds, and Ivy Guttridge in Wolverhampton have been at the heart of local inter-faith groups and movements that Peter Bell eulogised about. Their contribution to the closer links between people of different faiths enjoyed in this country should not be underestimated.

I want to number Peter Bell and Ivy Guttridge among other Methodists who have been pioneers in the inter-faith cause. Let me just name some of these: Professor Wesley Ariarajah, Dr Stanley Samartha, Dr Geoffrey Parrinder, Professor Kenneth Cracknell, Dr Elizabeth Harris, Dr Scott Lidgett, D.T. Niles.

It is possible to be a good Methodist like the ones I have named, and to be deeply committed to inter-faith work. It is significant that Methodists have been strong, and often instrumental in local, national and international inter-faith initiatives. And last year the Methodist Conference made a bold and courageous decision to elect me President Designate for Conference 2000 which will be held in nearby inter-faith Huddersfield. I am strongly committed to closer relationships between people of different faiths. A theological premise at the heart of Methodism might help to explain Methodist commitment to the inter-faith movement, and to discuss this I go back to the teaching of Methodism's beloved John Wesley.

John Wesley's theology is expressed in his sermons, and there is a particular collection of forty-four sermons. In these it is clear that Wesley was preaching and writing to help Methodists spread scriptural holiness. This was his main, but not only, concern. Being an 18th century intellectual, he was aware of a wide range of theological and philosophical issues of his day. Some of these he tackled in his forty-four sermons, and some in other sermons outside the forty-four. One of the issues that concerned him, over 200 years ago, was the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. This was a matter of importance to other 18th century theologians also, and was unavoidable for Wesley's preachers and missionaries who later travelled to Asian and African countries.

Wesley did not have access to people of other faiths, their sacred texts and other writing in the way we do. But the more he saw of other faiths, the more he was forced to reflect on Christianity and other faiths, and to help revise stereotypical views of them. John Wesley did not leave us a comprehensive theology of world religions, but as shown in the writings and reflections of the Methodists I have named, it is possible to find in his writings some of his views which some might consider to be surprisingly inclusive and hospitable. It might be expected or assumed that John Wesley would regard all those outside the Christian faith whether they be British pagans, Hindus, or Muslims, as in equal need of the Christian Gospel. But his sermon "On Faith" and his sermon entitled "On Living Without God" present a different picture. In the former, Wesley affirms the possibility of a kind of faith among "heathens" which, through the faith of a servant, is nevertheless saving faith; and in the latter, while stressing the important change which occurs when a person is 'born of God', he refuses to condemn "all the heathen and Mohametan world to damnation."

A Methodist Conference view on Christianity and other faiths (Report to Conference in 1992) says this:

"John Wesley ... was impressed by the faith of others and willing to learn from their spiritual quests ... he favourably compared the atmosphere of a synagogue with that of some Christian places of worship. Of the vast world of Islam he had little or no experience but he did try to take some account of it. Of a writing which he was content to believe came from the hand of a Muslim, he could remark that 'it contains all the principles of pure religion and undefiled' (sermon "On Faith"). If Wesley could find at work in people what for him were "the essentials of true religion", namely, "humble, gentle, patient, love," he believed he had to acknowledge that "they were taught of God, by his inward voice," and so search the scriptures for support. So it was that, preaching from Mark 9:38-39 (Sermon "A Caution Against Bigotry"), he could affirm, "if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew or Deist or Turk (Muslim) casting out devils, were I to forbid him, either directly or indirectly, I should be no better than a bigot still."

The report went on to say, "the catholic Spirit Wesley showed towards people of different Christian faith ought to characterise our attitude towards those of other faiths". (1992 Conference Agenda pgs. 275, 276)

Wesley Ariarajah, referred to earlier, has pinpointed the doctrine of "prevenient grace" as the key to these views of John Wesley.

In John Wesley's view no human being is wholly without the grace of God. The grace of God is a universal gift of God. This grace is the light that enlightens all people. The human conscience, the ability to discern good and evil, and to walk "in any instance to the light" is rooted in John Wesley's thought, in the universally present grace of God. This gift of grace within all human beings allows the possibility for all to respond to God. It indicates too that God is not without witness anywhere. And all this opens up for me the possibility of seeing and recognising something of the experience of God, the transforming relationship with God, outside the Christian faith and outside the church. The theology of prevenient grace needs to be revisited again and again by Methodists, not least in the contemporary multi-faith reality in which we seek 'to serve the present age, our calling to fulfil'.

Wesley Ariarah notes that -

"The evangelistic task is not to deny God's universal grace, but to help persons move from 'grace to grace'. And the theological task lies in trying to understand the nature of the relationship between this universal grace of God available to all and the life offered to humanity, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

On the basis of what has been said then it could be argued that John Wesley's thought is not consistently "exclusivist". Peter Bell was rooted in this strong tradition of seeing something of God in all human beings. He was a good Methodist. As such he was deeply committed to inter-faith work. He was a good man. We salute him. We salute his memory.

May God give Leeds, and all other cities, a Peter Bell, or at least his vision for closer relations between people of different faiths, and a good dose of his energy. The best tribute you can pay him is to commit yourself to developing strong relations between people of different faiths, and to ensure that Leeds retains its inter-faith maturity.