

Inter Faith Encounter: Luxury or Necessity?

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An Introductory Tribute

But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact between religions (sometimes translated as 'concord' between religions) is good.¹

At the heart of these words is the statement that those who speak against religions that are not their own do not promote their own religion but damage it, diminish it. Although similar things have been said in the last half century, the quote is from the 12th Rock Edict of King Asoka, ruler of much of what is now India, in the 3rd century BCE. Tradition says that he converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody campaign of conquest and spent the remainder of his rule seeking to create concord on Buddhist principles. The principle that we paint our own beliefs in a poor light if we denigrate the beliefs of others lies behind my words, as I know it lay behind what inspired Dr Peter Bell when he set up Leeds Concord in 1976.

It is a great privilege to have been asked to give the first Peter Bell Memorial Lecture. I first met Peter Bell in the mid-1990s, when I had just been appointed as Secretary for Inter Faith Relations within the Methodist Church and was travelling around Britain, trying to find out what was happening in inter faith relations in different parts of the country. During this time, I visited Bradford and then Leeds, two very different inter faith contexts. By that time, Leeds Concord had been established for twenty years. Peter Bell was one of a number of Methodists in Britain who had pioneered and were still pioneering the building of good relationships between faiths in the 1970s. I cannot hope to name all of them but they include: Geoffrey Parrinder (1910-2005), lay academic who pioneered the study of African Traditional Religion and wrote numerous books on comparative religion;² Kenneth Cracknell, the first Executive Secretary of the Committee for Relationships with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) of the

¹ 12th Major Rock Edict of King Asoka, translated by Ven S. Dhammika.

² Parrinder's biographer was Martin Forward: 1998, *A Bag of Needmets: Geoffrey Parrinder and The Study of Religion*, Bern: Peter Lang.

British Council of Churches;³ John Hastings, who, in 1976, set up a committee within the Division of Social Responsibility of the Methodist Church on inter faith relations and helped to found the Bangladesh Inter-Religious Council for Peace and Justice in 1983; Ivy Gutridge (1923-2004), who became ‘note-taker’ of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group in 1974; Pauline Webb who, as Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC World Service, brought into world broadcasting faiths other than Christianity;⁴ Lynne Price of Birmingham University, whose doctorate was entitled, ‘Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue: A Methodist Pilgrimage’;⁵ Inderjit Bhogal, who is now Director of the Yorkshire and Humberside Faiths Forum and founder/Chair of the City of Sanctuary Movement; Martin Forward, my predecessor as Inter Faith Officer in the Methodist Church;⁶ Roy Pape, who returned to Britain from 14 years of missionary service in India with a mission to change the attitudes of Christians to people of other faiths; Eric Lott, who I will mention later; Ray Trudgian, who served in Zambia in the 1960s and found himself teaching world religions to multi-religious classes in Britain the 1970s. I could go on. Peter Bell was a significant figure in this remarkable group of people within the Methodist Church, all of whom I have regarded as mentors.

I could give a lecture on what within Methodism might have produced people of this calibre but I will not. Each of the Methodists I have mentioned drew deeply from the Methodist tradition in their work for good inter faith relations. But there were, of course, people from other Christian churches active at the same time. To name but a few, in the Church of England, there was: Roger Hooker (1934-1999);⁷ Christopher Lamb; Bishop Kenneth Cragg (b. 1913);⁸ and Marcus Braybrooke.⁹ Within the United Reformed Church, there was Owen Cole¹⁰ and, within the Roman Catholic Church, Bishop Charles Henderson and Brother Daniel Faivre S.G. There were also Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Baha’is, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, who, in the 1970s, were taking up the challenge to move beyond their own community. Let me begin by honouring all of these.

In this presentation, I wish to combine two elements: a personal reflection on inter faith relations in the 1970s and 1980s, when Leeds Concord was establishing itself; and a call for renewed inter faith encounter in the present. My focus will be on the kind of dialogue that was always at the heart of Leeds Concord – face to face dialogue. The government has made a distinction between inter faith encounter that is ‘side by side’, when people of different

³ As an excellent example of his current writing, see; Kenneth Cracknell, 2005, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, London: Epworth.

⁴ See Pauline Webb, 2006, *World Wide Webb: Journeys in Faith and Hope*, London: Canterbury Press Norwich

⁵ Published as Lynne Price, 1989, *Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue: A Methodist Pilgrimage*, Bern: Peter Lang.

⁶ As an example of current his writings on inter faith relations see: 2008, *The Nature and the Name of Love: religion for the contemporary world*, London: Epworth.

⁷ Pioneering was Roger Hooker’s booklet, containing four lectures on inter-religious encounter in India: 1973, *Uncharted Journey*, London: The Church Missionary Society.

⁸ His writing has been prolific and includes the seminal work published in the 1950s, *The Call of the Minaret*.

⁹ Braybrooke’s written work has been prolific. One of his latest publications is: 2009, *Beacons of The Light: 100 holy people who have shaped the history of humanity*, Winchester and Washington: O Books.

¹⁰ See Owen Cole, 2009, *Cole Sahib: The Story of a Multifaith Journey*, Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press.

faiths come together in mutual respect to work on an issue of common interest such as education, pastoral care or social cohesion, and that which is ‘face to face’, when people from different religions come together in mutual respect to learn about what each other hold dear in their belief and practice.¹¹ Both are important, but the face to face form, I believe, has come under threat in recent years. Affirming religious identity in a secular environment has become, for some, more important than learning from people of other religions. In a society that is driven by targets and competition for funding, people of different faiths often come together on civic platforms but may not have the time for a meeting to discuss prayer or the meaning of suffering.

In reflecting on these elements, I will draw on thirty years of inter faith involvement in Britain and overseas, including 11 years as the national inter faith officer of the Methodist Church.¹² I will also draw on research for a paper that I wrote in 2009 for a publication project, within which I was given the task of writing about where I, as a Christian, believed we were now, in inter faith relations in Britain.¹³ Running throughout will be the view that inter faith encounter has never been a luxury; it has always been and still is a necessity.

Inter Faith Relations in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s

My personal reflections, therefore, begin with the 1970s. Forgive me if, at this point, I concentrate on what Christians were doing rather than those from other faiths. In the 1970s, when Leeds Concord was established, I was a young teacher of English in the London Borough of Brent. I had just returned from a two year teaching contract in Jamaica, where I had had my first recognisable inter faith encounter – with the Rastafarians. I had also travelled to Central America and had flown back to Jamaica from Panama, where I had visited the Baha’i House of Worship there, a most beautiful structure, finished only in 1972. In Brent, I found myself teaching classes that were predominantly Asian and Afro-Caribbean, and multi-religious. At this point, however, it was inter-cultural encounter that I was passionate about, rather than inter faith encounter. Into my classes, I brought works by Caribbean writers such as V. S Naipaul, Edward Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. I was aware of dissatisfaction among Afro-Caribbean youth and my concern was mirrored in the churches.¹⁴

In 1976, the British Council of Churches (BCC) published a statement from their Working Party on Britain as a Multi-Racial Society, *The New Black Presence in Britain: A Christian*

¹¹ *Face to Face and Side by Side: A framework for partnerships in our multi faith society*, 2008, Department of Communities and Local Government.

¹² I was Executive Secretary for Relationships with People of Other Faiths for the Methodist Church in Britain from 1996-2007.

¹³ The publication will be authored by a Jewish, Muslim, Christian dialogue group: the Manor House Group.

¹⁴ Some facts in the following section of this paper are drawn and adapted from one part of ‘How did the British Christian community come to be where it is today? A Personal Reflection from a “liberal” Christian’, my forthcoming chapter in a book to be published by the Manor House Group.

Scrutiny.¹⁵ Seven elements in the ‘disorder’ within ‘the black communities’ were identified. These included large numbers of potentially creative young people stigmatised by spending years in Special Needs schools and conflict between these young people, and the police.¹⁶ The churches were called upon not only to ‘alleviate the hardships of black people’ but to express fellowship with ‘newly established churches’, to establish a centre for Black Art and to intervene in the education of black people.¹⁷

At this point in the twentieth century, the presence of Afro-Caribbean people seemed at the top of the agenda rather than Britain’s ever-increasing religious diversity. Yet, in response, I believe, to what was happening locally in several parts of the country, including Leeds and Wolverhampton, Lamin Sanneh, in 1974, was commissioned by the British Council of Churches (BCC) to write a survey of Islam in the United Kingdom. In the same year, the BCC and the Conference of British Missionary Societies (CBMS) set up a Presence of Islam in Britain Advisory Group, chaired by the Rt Revd David Brown, Bishop of Guildford. The next step, to cut a long story short, was the founding of CRPOF ‘to promote a creative Christian response’ to religious plurality. Its first meeting was held in May 1978 with David Brown in the Chair and Kenneth Cracknell as Executive Secretary. Leeds Concord, at that moment, was already formed.

For those involved in inter faith relations at this time, it was a period of incredible enthusiasm. The early members of CRPOF were, in the main, people who had come close to faiths other than Christianity in Asia and Africa, during missionary service. They had returned to Britain with a new mission: to change the attitudes of Christians in Britain towards the faiths that were increasingly present, through encouraging face to face encounter and new theological thought on religious diversity. Nothing less than a change in the face of Christianity in Britain was hoped for. In 1980, Kenneth Cracknell wrote a pamphlet called, *Why Dialogue?*¹⁸, was not afraid to tackle ‘difficult’ verses in the Christian Bible such as John 14.6.¹⁹

Many Christians in the pews, however, were either apathetic or resistant. Those actively involved in inter faith initiatives were a minority and could feel very isolated. Ivy Gutridge, for instance, felt misunderstood by fellow Methodists when she began her inter faith work in Wolverhampton in 1974. She was not alone in this. I wonder if Peter Bell experienced the same thing. I should imagine he did, as he drew together Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues, one of the first activities of Leeds Concord, which was, no doubt, a response not only to the

¹⁵ 1976, *The New Black Presence in Britain: A Christian Scrutiny: A Statement by The British Council of Churches’ Working Party on Britain as a Multi-Racial Society*, London: community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches.

¹⁶ *The New Black Presence*, p. 18-19

¹⁷ *The New Black Presence*, p. 33-34

¹⁸ Kenneth Cracknell, 1980 *Why Dialogue?: a first British comment on the W.C.C. Guidelines*, London: British Council of Churches, ISBN 0 85169 075 0. The World Council of Churches document was: 1979, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, Geneva: World Council of Churches

¹⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’.

growing number of Muslims in Leeds but also to the fact that Leeds had developed the third largest Jewish community in Britain, following mass emigration from Central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰

Such scepticism was not restricted to the 1970s. In the 1980s, the Christian enthusiasts of the 1970s were writing books. Kenneth Cracknell's *Towards a New Relationship*, published in 1986, was a classic.²¹ Yet, there was still resistance. It was during this decade, in 1986, that I travelled to Sri Lanka to study Buddhism. I can remember one Christian saying she would pray for me, because I would be at risk from demonic influences. And my own father, a Methodist minister, was deeply distressed. I was supported by a World Council of Churches scholarship for what I thought would be a one year sabbatical. In fact, I stayed over seven years altogether and eventually completed a doctorate in Buddhist Studies there. It changed my career and my spirituality, and prepared me for all the inter faith work I have since been involved in. Central to the experience was empathetic, in-depth encounter with Buddhist belief and practice.²²

As I reflect on my own experience, I am reminded of what Roger Hooker once said in the late 1990s during a presentation to Christians on evangelism and inter faith dialogue. Quoting his father-in-law, Max Warren, he said of the latter:

My task is to listen to what the other person says, to be challenged and questioned, disturbed and attracted by it. It was Max Warren who taught us that we have so to expose ourselves to the other faith that we are tempted to join it.²³

I did so expose myself to Buddhism. In the 1980s, my journey was just one example of the multiple religious pathways that Christians were taking at the time. Now, in the twenty first century, more are arising, for instance for the children of inter faith marriages and among those who openly claim hyphenated or multiple religious identity.

To return to Britain in the 1980s, a key moment for inter faith relations was the establishing of The Inter Faith Network for the UK in 1987. The prime movers were three Christians: Kenneth Cracknell, Tom Gulliver and Brian Pearce, a retired civil servant, who was already involved with CRPOF. But Christians were not the Network's gatekeepers. The Network was owned and managed jointly by its members: faith communities, inter faith groups and educational institutions. This was the hallmark of what was to happen in the next decade. A more equal playing field between faiths was to

²⁰ See 'Christians and Jews: Leeds Concord Experience' in Martin Forward (ed.), 1989, *God of all Faith: discerning God's presence in a multi-faith society*, The Methodist Church Home Mission Division: 63-68.

²¹ Kenneth Cracknell, 1986, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith*, London: Epworth Press.

²² I have written about this experience in a number of publications, most recently in Elizabeth J Harris, 2010, *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*, London: Epworth Press.

²³ Roger Hooker, 'Christian Faith and Other Faiths; the tension between Dialogue and Evangelism' in *Yes*, July-September 1999: 12-15, here p. 14.

come to Britain, and it happened in several different sectors, most particularly in chaplaincy services for prisons, hospitals, universities and airports.

The movement towards a more equal playing field, however, had a consequence that not all Christians foresaw at the time: fear among the Christian community that the Christian identity of Britain would be lost or that the Christian Church would lose its leadership role in the religious life of Britain. Personally I believe that Christians need to recognise that they belong to one religious community in Britain, not **the** religious community. However, the journey towards such an awareness is not an easy one. High-profile cases in the media, for instance of a member of the staff of British Airways not being able to wear a cross when working or of charity shops not wanting to sell Christmas cards with Christian symbols on them, have made many Christians feel beleaguered and discriminated against, fearful that other religious communities are moving too close to centre stage. The twenty years since the end of the 1980s has seen many positive developments in inter faith relations but also setbacks.

Inter Faith Encounter as a Necessity Now

So where are we now? Why is inter faith encounter a necessity now? Most particularly, why is face-to-face encounter a necessity now? We are at a point when the Government is affirming in its official statements the potentially positive role of religion in building community cohesion and promoting the social health of our cities. Numerous local dialogue initiatives are happening up and down the country. There is a government-backed Inter Faith Week and an increasing number of resources for people to use if they want to encounter faiths not their own. But has some of the enthusiasm of those early pioneers been lost among those who are currently involved in promoting inter faith relations? And how many within the different religions of Britain have not even begun any kind of inter faith journey?

Let me explore three reasons why I am convinced that face-to-face encounter is essential now. The first is to face and redress the complexities of history. The second is for our own spiritual growth, our own salvation. The third is for the sake of an increasingly secular but not anti-spiritual society.

Redressing the Complexities of History

One of the first lessons that I learnt about inter faith relations was that it was influenced by social and historical factors. To take Sri Lanka as an example, encounter between Christians and Buddhists there is affected by events in the nineteenth century, most particularly by the acrimony that arose between the two religions because of the activities of the evangelical Christian missionaries who served there when the country was under British rule. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, according to archival research, leading Buddhists sought what we might now call a co-existence model of inter faith relations, a model based on mutual respect. Although they were well aware that Buddhists and Christians had different beliefs, they generally welcomed Christian missionaries into Buddhist monasteries. They gave missionaries Buddhist manuscripts and taught some of

them Pali, the language in which they were written. When those same Wesleyan, Anglican and Baptist missionaries began what they believed they had been called to, namely to gain converts through pointing out the weaknesses in Buddhism, the first reaction of some Buddhist monks was to send petitions to the British government, pointing out that material offensive to Buddhists should be forbidden, because it was not conducive to harmony. When these petitions fell on deaf ears, they wrote documents on ola leaves, refuting Christian attacks on Buddhism, and went from village to village circulating them. Eventually, they gained printing presses and resistance to the missionary attitude towards Buddhism underwent metamorphosis, becoming a full-blown revival that was fuelled by anti-Christian sentiment.²⁴

Even when I arrived in the country in 1986, just 24 years ago, although much had been done in the post-colonial period by Sri Lankan Christians to build trust with Buddhists, distrust between the two religions could easily flare up. I can remember a Buddhist woman academic who declared in her first conversation with me, 'Dialogue is usually domination. What begins with sharing often results in domination by the most powerful side.' For her, Christianity had the most power and I was a representative of it.²⁵ Throughout my time in Sri Lanka, I was periodically aware that some Buddhists distrusted me simply because I was a Christian. More recently, the influx of foreign aid organisations after the tsunami has given rise to anti-Christian feeling. Rumours abounded of Christian Non-Governmental Organisations bribing people to become Christians through promises of material help. At such times, progress in building good relationships stalls.

Historically conditioned distrust between religions is not dead. Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka is just one example. Let me now move to Jewish-Christian relations. A tremendous amount has been done in the last 70 years to promote Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Council of Christians and Jews, founded in Britain in 1942 at the height of Nazi power in Germany, has been key to this. So has The Woolf Institute in Cambridge, which began with the study of Jewish-Christian relations. Nevertheless, anti-semitism in Europe is not dead and its principal roots lie within the Christian church. Martin Luther built on many centuries of anti-semitism when he wrote an infamous essay entitled, *On the Jews and their Lies*, which claimed that God does not hear the prayers of Jews, urged that all synagogues should be burnt down and referred to the Jews as, 'our plague, our pestilence, our misfortune'. This is usually omitted from published collections of his works now, but, in the Germany of 1936, it was included and could have contributed to the silence of many Christians in the face of Hitler's diabolical plans to eradicate the Jews of Europe. Christians cannot edit this out of their history. In fact, I would suggest that negative portrayals of Judaism persist in some Christian pulpits. I am angered, for instance, when Judaism is presented as a religion of law and Christianity, one of love, or if the Pharisees are presented as the epitome of false religion. Both representations bear false

²⁴ I summarise the history of this in Harris, 2010: 131-136.

²⁵ See Harris, 2010: 130-131.

witness against Judaism. To face and transcend this history we need encounter, conversation.

I will take one other example, that of Muslim-Christian relations. In Camberley, there has been a dispute over whether a listed Victorian school building close to the Sandhurst Barracks, which has been used by the Muslim community since 1996, should be pulled down to build a domed mosque. Plans seemed to be going ahead successfully until there was an inflammatory online campaign. In March 2010, the local council refused to allow planning permission.²⁶ Before that, in November 2009, over 57% of the Swiss people voted in favour of a ban on the building of minarets, which the Union Démocratique du Centre, a party in opposition, had linked with islamisation. Surveys before the vote had suggested that only about 34% of people would vote in favour.²⁷

Muslims might say that both are representative of the Islamophobia, the fear of Islam, which exists in Europe. This Islamophobia is not a product of 9/11 or 7/7, although these tragic events may have added fuel to it. Some might argue that it goes back to the struggle over southern Europe in the 8th Century CE, for instance when Frankish, Christian forces defeated those of the Umayyad Caliphate in 732 near Tours, or to the Crusades or to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. The history of Muslim-Christian relations in Europe has been one in which co-operation and co-existence, for instance when Muslims and Christians of the Church of the East worked together to rescue Greek and Roman literature, has alternated with violence and vilification.

In Britain now, we are heirs of these complex histories, the positive and the negative. We need to build trust in the face of them, aware of them. If we do not, I fear we will not move beyond them.

Inter Faith Relations and Personal Transformation

My second area concerns personal transformation. The German scholar, Michael von Brück once explained:

Dialogical communion with the other is possible only when I recognise the partner as a possible source for my truth and salvation, or at least my understanding of my truth and salvation.²⁸

Do we need religions not our own to help us towards an understanding of truth? I believe we do. Many people who are rooted in one religious tradition are brought up to believe that all they need is to be found in their own tradition. At one level, this is no doubt true.

²⁶ See for instance, 'Camberley mosque plan rejected by council', 11th March 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

²⁷ See for instance, Tariq Ramadan, 'My compatriots' vote to ban minarets is fuelled by fear' in *The Guardian*, 29 November 2009.

²⁸ Michael von Brück, 'What do I expect Buddhists to discover in Jesus? "Christ and the Buddha embracing each other"', in 2001, Perry Schmidt Leukel (Ed.), *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus*, St Ottilien: EOS Verlag: 158-175, here p. 160.

Each religion has its own integrity. Each is complete in itself. Each has guided and nurtured countless people and will continue to do so. Yet, I do not think there is one religion in the world that has developed in isolation from others or that has been unaffected by others in its historical development. Buddhism's early years were marked by debate with Brahmins and Jains. Judaism and Christianity may have been influenced by an older monotheistic religion, the Zoroastrianism of what is now Iran. Christianity grew out of Judaism and was heavily influenced by Greek thought. Islam's message spread in the polytheism of the Arabian peninsula, and in contact with Jewish and Christian groups. The development of Sikhism was influenced by both Islam and Hinduism.

These historical facts do not, I believe, take away from the authority of scriptures that are revealed or divinely inspired. They do suggest, however, that religions, in their historical development, have given to each other and helped each other to define themselves. I have spoken about mistrusts rooted in history. This is the positive side of history.

With the globalization of the twenty and twenty first centuries, the possibility of religions giving to one another has increased tremendously. The twentieth century was one in which many westerners engaged with religions that were not their own and found tremendous riches. For some, it led to conversion. Many, however, remained within their own faith, whilst carrying with them an awareness of another faith that became transformative. I was one of these, of which more later. Methodist minister and missionary, Eric Lott, was another. He spent much of his working life in India, teaching at the United Theological College, Bangalore. I do not know of another Christian clergyman who is as knowledgeable about Hindu traditions. More than this, and I believe I can say this without misrepresentation, Hindu spirituality deepened his awareness of God. In one article, he wrote of the Tamil Hindu poets who were called 'the love-drowned ones', those drowned in the love of God. He compared their spirituality with the hymns of Charles Wesley, one of the founding figures of Methodism, and gave this message to his readers:

We should not, though, go on overlooking those faith traditions that may even enable us to recover a deeper sense of the wonder that is God, the wonder of God's all-embracing love and all-pervading presence, the wonder of Charles Wesley's 'Love Divine; all love's excelling'. It may be that this faith from afar may enable us to be more faithful to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁹

Eric Lott found a touching point between the love-drowned poets and his own Methodist spirituality that was transformative in that it helped him to appreciate further the love of God. My successor in the Methodist Church, Dr Joy Barrow, has been formed in her inter faith skills by a transformative and in-depth encounter with the Sikh tradition.

²⁹ 'All Loves Excelling: A Methodist Reflects on the Hindu Faith' in *A Great Commission: Christian Hope and Religious Diversity*, Martin Forward, Stephen Plant, Susan White (eds.), 2000, Bern: Peter Lang: 265, quoted in Elizabeth J. Harris, 'Methodist Inter Faith Practitioners and the Wesleys' in *Epworth Review*, 35.3, July 2008: 72-83, here p. 74.

The different faiths present in Britain touch in remarkable ways, ways that are discovered with joy when we meet ‘face to face’, ways that can strengthen us all in our own faiths. But it is not only recognising the touching points that can lead to the kind of transformation through inter faith encounter that I am speaking of. There are differences between our faiths also. Inter faith face to face encounter is also about ‘respecting the otherness of the other’, a principle I was taught many years ago by Muslim colleagues. How differences should be dealt with is one of the most important issues in inter faith encounter. Whether we can respect them without feeling threatened by them is a crucial issue. For instance, can I, as a Christian, respect that the way in which Muslims see the person of Jesus is different from my own? Can Muslims respect that the way in which Christians have made theological sense of the One God, in the light of their convictions about Jesus, is different from their own? Can Buddhists respect those religions that place God at the centre? Can those who place God at the centre respect religions such as Buddhism and Jainism that do not? Grappling with questions such as these is not easy but is essential for if we are to have face-to-face inter faith encounter that is more than skin deep.

I would want to add more here. I believe that some of the most creative spiritual insights can come to us when we work with difference rather than avoid it. I have certainly found this in my own encounter with Buddhism in the last 26 years. Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition that does not place a creator God at the centre. The ‘Three Jewels’ lie at the centre: the Buddha; the Dharma, the truth about the cosmos that the Buddhas teach; the Sangha, the community of followers of the Buddhist path, interpreted in some Buddhist countries as the monastic community. There is not time here to expand on this encounter. All I will affirm here is that my encounter with a religion that may seem very different from Christianity has been transformative and has led to deep interrogation of my own faith.³⁰

Inter Faith Relations for the Sake of Society

I now move to my third area: that we need face to face encounter for the sake of society. If I was to ask the members of any inter faith group, ‘How do you think religion is viewed by society?’ I am sure that I would receive different answers. The negative ones might include: ‘Society ignores religion’; ‘Society thinks it’s irrelevant’; ‘Society doesn’t understand religion’; ‘Society doesn’t want us to express religion and seeks to make this difficult’; ‘Only the bad stories about religion are seized by the media – never the good stories’; ‘Society is ignorant about religion - it’s the religious questions on quiz programmes that people can never answer’. The positive ones might include: ‘But surely the Government is actively supporting projects of religious communities and realises social harmony can be increased if religious communities are empowered’; ‘Practices that come from religions such as meditation are now being used in schools, prisons and therapeutic settings – surely this is good’. And, as a university lecturer, I could say, ‘What

³⁰ See for instance, Elizabeth J Harris, ‘The Beginning of Something being Broken: The Cost of Crossing Spiritual Boundaries’ in *Spirituality Across Borders*, The Way Supplement 2002/14, Oxford: 6-17.

about the growing number of applicants to my own university to do a degree in Theology and Religious Studies – or the amount of popular literature that contains spiritual themes.’

I believe we are at a crucial point in the West, where religion is concerned. There are vast numbers of people for whom religious language is simply a closed book. Yet, I would never dismiss these people as non-spiritual, as without altruistic feeling or as uninterested in the difference between good and evil or the meaning of life. A colleague of mine at Hope University, Jannine Jobling, has just written a book called ‘Fantastic Spiritualities: Monsters, Heroes and the Contemporary Religious Imagination’, which explores the spirituality present in popular literature.³¹

Our society may be increasingly secular but it is not without spirituality, if we define this as an interest in things beyond the material. People who belong to a particular religious community need to communicate with this larger society. A central question is how? Do we simply try to make sure that the identity of our tradition survives? Or do we have an interest in the survival of all religions and communicating to a wider society that all religions have something to offer that is relevant to the contemporary world? Is an attack on one religion an attack on all? Is an attack on one religious building an attack on all? I believe we need to work together in this area so that, in spite of the differences between religions, we can answer the last three questions in the affirmative.

I am not proposing that the identity of our different religions should be watered down. Far from it. It is from our unique identities that we, as people of different faiths, can give to one another and to wider society. What I am trying to say is that if we, as people belonging to different religious communities, cannot show to the world that we are willing to meet face to face, learn from each other and act together, then the name of religion in the twenty first century will be debased. Not only that, it may lead to renewed violence in our cities. I have moved in a circle, therefore, and have come back to the place where I started, with King Asoka, who perceptively said that those who disparage other religions through devotion to their own, harm their own religion.

Let me give another illustration before I conclude. I choose not to have a car in Liverpool, which means that I often take taxis or minicabs. In Liverpool, taxi drivers are not silent. If I am asked what I do, I am honest. I teach Religious Studies at Liverpool Hope University. Views and questions then come thick and fast. Never has my statement led to silence. Often I hear the view that religion is causing all the problems in the world. Some express amazement that young people want to study religion. ‘What do they do with it?’ they ask.

Can people of different faiths address this kind of ignorance together? Surely the answer must be yes. We may not agree on everything and the path of co-operation may not be easy, but we are, I believe, stronger together than apart.

³¹ Jannine Jobling, 2010, *Fantastic Spiritualities: Monsters, Heroes and the Contemporary Religious Imagination*, London and New York: Continuum.

Conclusion

In this presentation, I have tried to reflect on the initial enthusiasm of the pioneers of inter faith relations such as Peter Bell and to point to the current marginalization of face to face encounter. I have also explored what I believe are three pressing reasons for us to engage in face to face encounter: to face and redress mistrust and perhaps bitterness rooted in history, which can poison relationships in the present and lead to conflict; to enrich our own personal journeys towards wholeness, whether this is a journey towards God or a journey towards the compassion and wisdom that lie at the centre of the universe; to minimize the potential for conflict that is present in our cities and to present a united and energetic face to those who are disillusioned with all traditional religion. All these reasons suggest that inter faith encounter is not a luxury but a necessity. My prayer is that people of all faiths in this country will realise just how necessary it is.